

Henry

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Chapter One

Henry was 24 when he got kicked out of his home by his parents.

“We've had enough of you sitting round and sponging off us. You need to get a life.”

Of course it hadn't been as quick as that. They gave him a month to get himself sorted and he'd taken them seriously enough to ask his friend Clive to let him sleep on the couch for a few days, two days before the month was up just in case his parents actually were serious. They were. When Henry got home from work that day he found his bags packed and waiting for him in the hallway.

“So you're serious then?” he asked.

“Yes,” they said. “Get a life and enjoy it.”

Henry drove round to Clive's and knocked on the front door. Clive opened it and saw the bags.

“Oh, you were serious then. I thought you were joking,” he said

Inside Henry sat on Clive's battered old couch and listened while Clive explained.

“The thing is you see, I've got this girl staying with me at the moment and it's kind of, like, awkward, you know, if you're here as well. We're just getting to know each other and you know. I'm sorry, like, but ...,” and he shrugged his shoulders.

Henry put his bags back in the boot of his car and sat behind the wheel. He didn't know what to do now. His parents had made it clear that he wasn't particularly welcome and Clive had made it clear he wasn't welcome, particularly or not. This was fast becoming a tricky situation. Henry ran through the list of his friends wondering if any of them would give him a room for a while. Clive, obviously not. George? Definitely not because George had a single room in a small house and there simply wasn't room for another person, unless George's dog moved out which was unlikely as George was more attached to the

dog than he was to his human friends. Sebastian? No, Sebastian was gay and although Henry was open-minded enough to have a gay friend he wasn't open-minded enough to actually stay overnight at his gay friend's house. Not that Sebastian had ever made a move on Henry, it was just that Henry wasn't quite as open-minded as he pretended to be.

"Oh, is that all?" thought Henry. "I was sure I had more than three friends. Bummer. I suppose I could always go to a hotel."

The problem with a hotel was that it would cost money and Henry had been planning to sleep on Clive's couch for free. Not only did hotels cost money, even a cheap one would cost more each night than he earned so it would be a very short term solution. As the most junior accounts clerk at Ashton-Mole he earned very little money and after the repayments on his car there wasn't a lot left over at the end of each week for expenses like accommodation.

Henry started his car and turned on the windscreen wipers because it had started to rain. Not heavily but the kind of gentle rain that lasted for days and thoroughly soaked everything. He drove off and headed into town where he knew there was a hotel. He pulled up in the small car park and went in to the brightly lit reception area. There was a strong smell of garlic and fried food coming from the hotel restaurant which was just off Reception. Behind the counter was an attractive young woman with a neat pony-tail and a tag pinned to her uniform. It was attached over her breast and the consequent angle of the tag made it difficult to read but it looked like her name was Tracy.

"Hi, umm, Tracy," said Henry. He was always a little nervous when talking to girls. "Umm, how much are rooms here?"

Tracy gave him the price range for a single, tiny little room up to the hotel's largest and plushest suite. Even the single, tiny room was a little too expensive for Henry's means but he thought it would be possible for just the one night and would give him time to think of something for the next night.

"OK, I'll have one of the small single rooms," he told Tracy, "just for one night."

Tracy beamed gloriously at him, her corporate lip gloss showing off her full lips to their full advantage.

"I'm afraid those rooms are fully booked at the moment," she said, sensing an opportunity to upgrade a guest and get some appreciation from the hotel manager. "There's a conference on this week and the only rooms we have available are a Queen Suite and an Executive Suite. Both have full en-suite facilities of course."

"Oh, I really can't afford that," muttered Henry, aghast. "I thought, I mean, umm, sorry," and he lurched towards the door. Back in his car, slightly damp from the rain, Henry drove off in search of another hotel. It was the same story, a conference had taken all the cheaper rooms although the girl was named Elaine not Tracy. And at a third, this time an older lady named Maureen. And the fourth, Shevaughn, and the fifth, Kimberly.

"Tracy was the prettiest," he thought to himself as he drove away from Kimberly, "although Shevaughn had a nice smile. What on earth do I do now?"

Spotting a supermarket that was still open, Henry realised he was getting quite hungry. After all, he hadn't had his evening meal, not so lovingly prepared by his mother. He pulled in to the supermarket car park and wandered the aisles looking for something to eat that didn't need any preparation. After all, he didn't have a kitchen. Henry ended up buying some soft bread rolls, a plastic packet of ham and a carton of chocolate flavoured milk.

Bereft of any fresh ideas, Henry took his purchases back to his car and headed for the local park because there were toilets there and he needed a pee. After washing his hands in cold water and drying them on some toilet paper because the hot air dryer wasn't working Henry sat in his car and stared out at the rain lightly obscuring the set of swings and the climbing frame that the kids played on when it wasn't raining.

"On their way home," he thought sadly to himself.

Henry loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top button of his collar. He

pulled a couple of bread rolls from the packet and roughly tore them in half and laid them on the passenger seat. He opened the chocolate milk and had a sip then rested it on the pull out drink holder. It wouldn't fit inside the drink holder because the holder was round and the carton was square but since he clearly wasn't going anywhere in the immediate future its lack of stability wasn't a problem. Picking up the packet of ham Henry realised he had yet another problem. He scrabbled with his fingers around the edges of the packet but couldn't find any purchase to be able to rip the cover off. He tried to tear the packet with his fingers and then his teeth but the plastic was too strong. Pulling his keys from the ignition Henry tried to cut through the plastic using the car key as a knife but it was too blunt.

Henry was close to tears. This was the worst day of his life. Even worse than when he'd held up his hand in primary school to answer the teacher's question and had got it wrong. Everyone had laughed at him and he'd never held up his hand again, only this time it was worse. He couldn't answer the question of how to open the packet and his stomach wouldn't stop asking the question.

A sudden light illuminated his car as a van drove round the corner, its headlights momentarily spraying Henry's car with its beams. Henry cowered a little in surprise and knocked his hand against the cigarette lighter on the dashboard.

"Aha!" he thought. "I could use the lighter to burn a hole in the plastic."

Henry pushed in the cigarette lighter until it clicked and sat back to wait for it to heat. Not being a smoker he had never used the cigarette lighter before but after a couple of minutes he began to wonder why it was taking so long. Surely it should have popped up by now? He pulled the lighter out of its socket and held his finger close to the element inside. It was cold. In a fit of temper he threw the lighter on the floor of the car and tears began to well in his eyes.

It was a good five minutes before Henry remembered that none of the accessories in the car would work unless the ignition was on. Feverishly he turned on the ignition and scrambled around in the foot well looking for the lighter. There it was! With a sigh of relief he

pushed it into the socket and ten seconds later it popped out with a reassuringly loud ping. Fifteen seconds after that Henry had burnt through the plastic of the ham packet and a bare seven seconds later he was happily munching on a rather dry ham roll. There were four slices of ham in the packet and six rolls in the bag and after the fourth ham roll Henry decided it would be a good idea to save the last two rolls for breakfast.

Henry pressed the little button on the side of his digital watch that he'd bought on special at a petrol station a year before and saw that it was now 23:13. No wonder he was feeling a little sleepy. Henry wiped a hole in the misting on his windscreen and peered into the darkness. Nothing was visible and all he could hear was a dog barking in the distance. He rested his head on the door jamb and closed his eyes and fell asleep.

He woke with a jolt and checked his watch. It was 23:26. He'd been asleep for a grand total of thirteen minutes and already his neck was aching and there was an indentation in his scalp from the seat belt buckle. Henry sighed and climbed out of the car and got back in on the back seat. It wasn't comfortable but at least he could partially stretch out, so long as he wound his legs between the two front seats and onto the passenger seat. Henry slept fitfully, waking with every vehicle that drove past.

The night went by slowly. Eventually the sky lightened and Henry woke up, his bladder bursting and tongue furred from the chocolate milk of the night before. Groaning, Henry unwound his legs from the front seats and rubbed some life back into them. He wound down the window and peered out at the rain which showed no sign of stopping. A man wearing a raincoat and carrying an umbrella politely greeted him with "Good morning!" and his dog barked at Henry before being dragged away.

Henry got out of his car and tried to stand upright but he couldn't. Every muscle and joint screamed in protest. Groaning he staggered over to the park toilets, bent and shaky like a very old man. He relieved himself and slowly, ever so slowly, forced himself upright and threw his arms around gently to try to get his blood flowing. Slowly he walked back to the car and sat in the driving seat, feeling damp and

dirty.

Checking his watch he found it was only 6:04. Almost two hours before his normal waking up time, but Henry knew he wouldn't be able to get back to sleep. Perhaps in a nice, warm, comfy bed with the prospect of his mother's cooked breakfast but not on a cold back car seat with only two slightly stale bread rolls and perhaps a mouthful of chocolate milk to look forward to. Henry groaned out loud and rubbed his eyes. They felt gritty. He felt very isolated, sitting there in a car with fogged up windows, unable to see if there was anyone else in the car park. Perhaps someone was sitting in their car, watching his car and waiting for him to get out so they could rob him.

Henry twisted the rear view mirror so he could see himself and was shocked by the mess his hair was in. Normally it was neatly combed and held in place with a touch of hair oil but now it looked like he'd been fifteen rounds with an overpowered hair dryer. There was also a ring of chocolate milk around his mouth.

"I wonder if mum packed my toiletries?" he thought to himself.

Getting out of the car he went round the back and opened the boot. His parents had packed a suitcase and a travel bag and the travel bag seemed the more likely. He opened it and rummaged through his underwear, hankies and a few science fiction books and eventually found his toothbrush, razor and comb in a side pocket. Grabbing them he slammed the boot shut and went back inside the park toilet. There was a button on the wall inside that lit the one bare bulb for about 30 seconds when it was pressed in but he managed to shave with cold water and no soap, stopping after every few stokes of the razor to push the button back in. It would have been easier if there had been a decent mirror but the sheet of once polished but now dull and dingy metal gave just enough of a distorted reflection that Henry was able to remove all but two or three patches of stubble. He cleaned his teeth in the darkness then returned to his car to use the rear view mirror to comb his hair. It looked like he'd be early for work today, perhaps by as much as two hours.

When he woke up again, his head ached and his watch told him it was 8:57. In a panic Henry started his car and flung it into reverse then

braked when he realised he couldn't see out of the rear window. In fact he couldn't see out of any of the windows because they were heavily fogged. He flicked on the rear window demister and turned the blower on full to clear the windscreen and muttered anxiously to himself and tapped his fingers on the steering wheel while he waited for them to clear the windows enough to allow him to make out large objects such as other cars.

Arriving in the Ashton-Mole car park at 9:21, Henry managed to find a parking spot in the corner furthest from the side door to the building and ran over to it, doing up his collar and pulling his tie into place. At 9:24 he skidded into the Accounts Office and Mr Cavendish, the Junior Accountant, glanced up at him.

"You are late," he growled, making a note of the time on a Post-It note. "If it happens again I shall report you to HR. You will stay behind for 24 minutes after work to make up the time."

Henry stammered an apology but Mr Cavendish wasn't listening. His attention was fully focused on a spreadsheet on his computer screen. Henry slid into his chair and rustled the papers on his desk to sound busy.

Paul, the clerk whose desk adjoined Henry's, leaned towards him.

"What did you get up to last night? You dog!" he said in a confidential whisper, and leered.

Henry was startled. No one had ever called him a dog before and he wasn't entirely sure he liked it.

"You've been in your suit all night," Paul murmured. Chit-chat wasn't permitted in the Accounts Office. "It's a mess. Was she good?" and leered again.

Henry stared at Paul then looked down at his trousers. They were badly wrinkled and were slightly damp. He imagined he could see faint wafts of steam coming from them.

"Oh lord," he thought. "It never occurred to me to change."

He excused himself and went to the office toilets where there was a decent mirror. His jacket was more wrinkled than his trousers and his shirt was indescribable. There was a chocolate milk stain which ran over the lapel of the jacket and onto his shirt front. With the better mirror and decent lighting Henry could also see the mess he had made shaving and the thin streak of dirt surrounding his face. In the semi darkness of the park toilet he'd managed to only wash the front of his face and not the sides.

He ran out into the car park and across to where he'd parked the car and dragged the suitcase from the boot. Panting he semi-ran back to the Accounts Office toilet, praying his parents had packed his spare suit and shirts. In one of the cubicles he balanced the suitcase on the toilet seat and pulled out his suit and a clean shirt and changed quickly. Just in time he stopped himself from thrusting his damp, wrinkled suit into the suitcase, realising it would make everything else damp. He zipped the suitcase back up and quickly washed his face again, this time with hot water and soap, and ran back to his car with the suitcase, his old suit balled up in his other hand.

He got back to his desk just as Mr Cavendish said "It's 9:42. You haven't started to do any work yet. I'm sending a memo to HR," and opened his email.

"Who was she then, eh?" leered Paul. "I bet it was that Julie in Purchasing. I've heard she's a right one. Was it her, eh? Bet she was good."

Henry tried to calm his breathing and ignored Paul. Despite being a level above him, Paul was only 21 and had no sense of decorum. Henry concentrated on his work. When morning break came around Henry went down to the canteen for a much needed coffee and a hot sausage roll. Paul went down to the canteen with him but disappeared quickly into a small group of his cronies.

Back at his desk, better able to think as the hot food and coffee worked their magic on him, Henry started to worry about what to do that night. He had no other friends who would be able to help him and he couldn't afford a hotel. The only real option was to spend the night in his car again or perhaps, and this was a new dimension to the

problem, find a hidey-hole somewhere on the Ashton-Mole premises where he could sleep and make use of their toilets. Down in Production they had showers in their toilets. Hmmm, this was an interesting idea. Certainly he'd be able to get a decent hot meal at lunchtime so if he filled up he should be able to make it through to 7.30 the next morning when the Production staff arrived and were able to get breakfast. Where to find a hidey-hole though?

There was nowhere in the Accounts Office that much was certain. It was all open plan except for the offices of the Chief Accountant and the Senior Accountant. Sales was all open plan as well and Purchasing was no go either. Then Henry remembered there was a small store room off the main Stores where the company had kept the precious metals in the days when they made catalytic converters for cars before the car manufacturers started making their own. The metals were catalysts for the cleaning process but they still wore away through general erosion and so the company had had to hold a small stock of them. That room wasn't used for anything anymore.

At lunchtime Henry went down to the canteen to get a big meal. He intended to have a look at the metal store room after eating to check it was still not in use. He took his plate of steak and kidney pie and extra vegetables over to an empty table and started to tuck in. He became aware of someone standing next to him.

"Here, what you been saying about me and you?" demanded Julie from Purchasing.

"What do you mean?" stammered Henry.

Julie was a nice looking girl but she scared him possibly even more than other girls scared him.

"Word's going round that you were with me last night," said Julie with a touch of anger in her voice. "I'm not having it. Stop telling people that."

"Oh lord, that damned Paul," thought Henry.

"I'm sorry," he said nervously. "I had to spend the night in my car

because my parents kicked me out and I can't afford a hotel and none of my friends and Paul thinks ...”

“You're not making any sense,” said Julie. She sat down opposite him. “Now take a deep breath and tell me properly.”

She listened carefully as Henry explained what had happened and how he'd spent the night. Slowly his nervousness decreased.

“But why does Paul think you were with me?” she asked when he'd ground to a halt.

“Because he's a sex mad little boy and just jumped to conclusions,” said Henry, astonished at himself for mentioning sex to a *girl*.

“Yeah, that Paul's an effing creep alright,” said Julie. “OK, I'll forgive you, just this once mind.”

She got up and walked away. Henry stared after her and then remembered his unfinished lunch. He wolfed it as fast as he could then ran down to the stores. The old Metal Store was securely padlocked and Henry had no idea where the key might be. Matt the storeman was giving him funny looks so Henry went back up to the Accounts Office. Despondently he got on with his work, worrying over the problem of where to sleep that night and how to keep his one spare suit clean.

When afternoon break came around Henry hurried down to the canteen. This was his last chance to eat any hot food until the next day. Julie came over to his table again as he was eating.

“Here, you really got nowhere to stay? I mean, like, tonight?” she said.

Henry nodded and told her his idea about the Metal Store and that it was securely locked and he hadn't been able to think of anywhere else so he'd have to go back to the park.

“Only you can stay at my house,” said Julie. “Like me mum's got a spare room you can use for a few nights till you're sorted and stuff. I already asked her and she says it's OK. I mean, like, if you want and

you haven't got no place else.”

Henry stared at her.

“And we can get to know each other,” added Julie. “It’ll be a laugh. What ya reckon?”

Chapter Two

Henry had to stay late, of course, because Mr Cavendish had noted that he started work 42 minutes late but Julie waited for him in the canteen. At 5:43 Henry rushed into the canteen and found her there, sitting alone at a table in a corner playing with her phone. Her face lit up when he arrived.

“I thought you'd never get here,” she said. “It's awfully spooky in here when it's closed and there's no one around.”

“I'm sorry,” stammered Henry. “Mr Cavendish wouldn't let me go until I'd made up the exact number of minutes.”

“You're here now, that's what matters,” said Julie, slipping her phone into her bag. “Come on, let's go.”

They walked out of the canteen and down into the car park. Apart from some senior manager's cars near the main entrance, Henry's car was all alone, tucked away in a far corner. It was still raining and Julie held her bag over her head to keep her hair dry. They scurried across the car park and Henry was acutely aware of how old and unimpressive his car was. It was fine as a runaround but not really the sort of car to drive a girl around, Not that Henry had ever driven a girl around, apart from his mum, who didn't count. Still, it was all he could afford for the time being.

Henry unlocked the car and Julie jumped into the passenger seat and squealed. She pushed her back against the seat, lifted herself up a little and felt around underneath. She pulled out a squashed chocolate milk carton and an empty ham packet. Fortunately the milk carton had been empty.

“Oh, er, sorry,” said Henry, red with embarrassment. “That was last night's dinner.”

Julie burst out laughing and casually threw the debris into the back.

“Sorry, didn't mean to laugh, like,” she said when she saw Henry's face. “It's just funny, isn't it.”

Henry started the engine and put on his seat belt.

“Where do you live?” he asked.

“Bainbridge Road, it's up on the new estate.”

“That's out the other side of town, isn't it?”

“Yeah. You know that new supermarket in town?”

“Yes,” said Henry.

“Well, head for that and I'll give you directions after.”

Henry reversed carefully out of his slot in the empty car park and headed for the gates. He turned right and headed into town. They sat in silence. Julie was enjoying the ride and Henry couldn't think of anything to say.

“This is better than the bus,” she said after a while. “It's always crowded and I never get a window seat. Will you be driving me to work and back if you stay with us?”

“Of course, if you want me to,” said Henry.

“Say something,” he thought to himself.

“Thanks,” said Julie. “Here, is that the park you slept in last night?” and she pointed off to the left.

“No,” said Henry. “It was closer in to town.”

“Ohhh, Memorial Park,” said Julie then giggled. “I had my first kiss there. From a boy.”

Henry turned red again. Best not to think about kissing Julie, he was already nervous enough.

“How old are you?” he asked.

“19, how old are you?”

“24.”

“Come on, think of something to talk about,” shouted Henry silently to himself.

“Umm, how old were you when you kissed that boy in Memorial Park?”

“15. How old were you when you first kissed a girl?”

“Umm,” said Henry. He either had to admit he'd never kissed a girl or lie and make up some age and then she'd probably want to know who he'd kissed. He went silent. Julie gave him a glance then looked out the window again.

“When you get to the supermarket turn right then left into Mulholland Street,” said Julie. “Who's your boss in Accounts?”

“Mr Cavendish.”

“Yeah, I know him. Creepy little man, isn't he. Does he always make you stay late?”

“Yes, at least if I'm late for work but that rarely happens.”

“He's got the hots for Kasey, can't take his eyes off her tits,” laughed Julie. “We all laugh at him when he comes over and Kasey plays up to him, teases him like. She puffs up her chest and adjusts her bra when he's there. Just for a laugh, like.”

Henry couldn't imagine calling Mr Cavendish 'creepy' or teasing him. He wouldn't have the courage. At the supermarket junction he came to a stop where the sign said 'STOP' then cautiously pulled out.

“Do you always go this slow?” asked Julie.

“I'm doing the speed limit,” said Henry.

“Oh, right,” said Julie. “Don't half seem slow though. Even the bus goes faster than this although it stops a lot.”

Henry went red again and gently pushed down on the accelerator so the speed crept up slightly. Julie glanced at him again and gave a tiny little nod.

“Next left,” she said.

Henry overshot the turning because Julie hadn't given him enough warning and he didn't want to brake hard in the rain. The roads might be greasy.

“Oops, missed it then,” said Julie. “Take the next left instead. Have you got a girlfriend?”

“No,” said Henry, turning red again. “Not at the moment.”

“Nah, 'spose not or you'd be staying at her place like. If you take the next left then you can go right into Mulholland Street.”

“Ask her if she's got a boyfriend,” Henry told himself.

“Ummm,” he said but couldn't get any further. It was a bit too personal a question.

“Do you always let Creepy Cavendish bully you?” asked Julie.

“What do you mean?” asked Henry. “He doesn't bully me.”

“Like, we all just go at five, no matter how late we got in. Josh doesn't really mind, he says, so long as the work is done.”

“Who's Josh?”

“Josh Allsop, he's Head of Purchasing. My boss.”

Henry didn't even know Mr Cavendish's first name.

“Just stay on this road for, like, forever.” said Julie. “You should just tell

him 'No, I'm going at five.'"

"I'd lose my job," said Henry.

"Nah you won't. Can't sack you for leaving when you're s'posed to leave."

Henry couldn't imagine saying anything like that to Mr Cavendish. He didn't think even Paul would dare do that, although Paul was never late. Except that time a couple of months ago. "Hmm" thought Henry "Paul didn't stay late that day."

"Why would Paul say I spent last night with you?" Henry blurted out, without thinking.

"Paul's a creepy little shit," said Julie. "It's cos I'm blonde and he thinks blondes are easy. Not that he'd know though cos I'd never go out with him, no matter how often he asks. Next right."

Henry turned right into Bainbridge Road.

"What number?"

"147, it's up there on the left, next door to the one with all the gnomes. That's Mrs Cecil, she's ninety and loves gnomes."

"Where shall I park?"

"Ohh, out the front'll do. Mum's car's on the drive."

Henry parked neatly outside the house, leaving plenty of room for Julie's mum to get in and out of her driveway.

"Thanks for the ride," said Julie, jumping out of the car. "Come on in and meet me mum."

"Mum, I'm home" called Julie as she opened the front door.

Julie's mum appeared from the kitchen. "You're late, Blossom. Hello, you must be Henry." She held out her hand. "I'm Denise Quincy,

Julie's mum.”

“Please to meet you, Mrs Quincy” said Henry, shaking her hand.

“Phh, I'm not Mrs anyone, call me Denise,” said Denise.

Julie had flung her coat over the back of a chair and was rummaging in the fridge.

“What's for dinner mum, I'm starving?”

Denise ignored her.

“Julie said you needed somewhere to stay for a bit. Is that right?” she said to Henry.

“Yes,” said Henry. “If that's at all possible?”

“Come on upstairs and I'll show you our spare room and if you like it we can have a chat about it.” Denise led the way upstairs.

“There's just me and Julie here. That's my room and that's Julie's. That's the bathroom and this is the spare.” She pushed open the door of what was obviously something of a store room since the suitcases and cardboard boxes were manifold, but it did have a bed in it.

“We just need to shift this stuff. We'll put it all in the shed if you want the room.”

“If that's all right with you, Mrs, ummm, Denise,” said Henry. Anything was better than sleeping in his car again.

“Good,” said Denise. “Let's go back down again.”

She paused in the doorway.

“May as well take something down now, no time like the present. Grab something.” She grabbed a suitcase and Henry grabbed a cardboard box and they went down to the shed.

Back in the kitchen Denise sat down and gestured to another chair.

“Were you wanting meals or just the room? You can eat with us if you like, it's no bother but if you've made other arrangements ...?”

Henry hadn't thought that far ahead.

“Umm,” he said. “Meals would be great if it's no bother.”

“Julie gives me seventy five a week for her keep,” said Denise, “now she's working. Wouldn't be fair like if I asked you for less. That's including meals. You eat what we eat.”

“Oh,” said Henry. For some reason it hadn't occurred to him that he'd be expected to pay. Still, he could afford seventy five a week although it wouldn't leave him much spare.

“That's fine,” he said. “Do you want it in advance? Only I haven't got that much on me at the moment. Would tomorrow do?”

Denise laughed. “Tonight you can have as our guest. You can pay me tomorrow for the next seven days. Cash mind. I don't want no cheques.”

“I'll go to the cash machine in the morning,” said Henry.

“Great,” said Denise. “Now you and Julie can bring the rest of the stuff down and put it in the shed while I do dinner then I'll sort you out some sheets and things and you can get settled in. Where's your stuff?”

“In my car,” said Henry.

“Good,” said Denise. “Right you two, get along.”

Denise's dinner wasn't as good as his mother's but anything was better than dry rolls and ham.

“So why'd your parents kick you out?” asked Denise while they were eating.

“They said it was time I got a life,” said Henry, realising how lame and pathetic that sounded and going red again.

“Well, don't expect much of a life here,” said Denise firmly. “I don't want no trouble here, mind. No alcohol or drugs or you'll be straight out. And no girls in your room and you stay out of Julie's room, OK”.

“I understand,” said Henry, feeling a little flattered that anyone could ever think he'd do any of those things. Not that he'd ever drunk alcohol or taken any drugs other than aspirin and girls were visions seen only from afar, not close up like in the same room.

Julie just sniggered quietly to herself and winked at Henry. Henry concentrated on his dinner.

“You're at Ashton-Mole, same as Julie?” asked Denise.

“Yes, but I'm in Accounts.”

“Accounts, eh, that must pay well.”

“No, I don't get much at all. I'm just a junior clerk.”

“How old are you, then?”

“I'm 24.”

“How come you're still only a junior?”

“I don't know. Paul's only 21 and he's already a senior clerk. I just never seem to get promoted. I've been there four years.”

“Hmm,” said Denise, with a glance at Julie.

“Mum, Henry'll probably be an accountant there one day.”

“Are you studying to be an accountant?” Denise asked Henry.

“Umm, no.” said Henry.

“Aren't you ambitious?” said Denise.

“Umm,” said Henry.

“Stop giving him a hard time, mum,” said Julie. “It's his life. He can do what he wants with it.”

Denise smiled at Henry. “Sorry,” she said. “I'm too nosy. Do you start the same time as Julie?”

“Henry's gonna give me a lift in,” said Julie, “and back.”

“That's nice of him,” said Denise. “I was talking to your auntie Kate today.”

The conversation drifted off into discussions of relatives between Julie and her mum which left Henry somewhat relieved. He was beginning to feel a little ashamed of himself under Denise's questioning. It wasn't that he lacked ambition, he just didn't know what direction to head in or what to do about it when he thought of a direction.

When dinner was over, Henry said he'd better get his belongings up to his room.

“I usually just watch TV until it's time for bed. Julie does too sometimes or she goes to her room when she's not out partying. You're welcome to join us if you want. There isn't much to do around here seeing as how it's a new estate unless you want to drive into town.”

“If you don't mind I think I'll get an early night,” said Henry. “I didn't sleep well last night.”

He got his bags out of the car and took them up to his room. He unpacked and neatly stored his clothes in the closet and hung his good suit in the wardrobe. His dirty suit he left hanging from the curtain rail.

“I'll ask Denise what to do about washing over the weekend,” he thought to himself. “I really can't face asking her tonight.”

He put on his pyjamas and climbed into the bed.

“Oh what a day. I'm exhausted. Thank god I've got somewhere to stay though. Should I tell my parents where I am? I suppose I'd better go round at the weekend and see if there's any post for me.”

He heard the sound of a TV blare briefly as the lounge door opened then closed again. There was a patter of feet up the stairs and the door to the room next to his opened and then slammed shut. Pop music started to play.

“That must be Julie. I'm sure Denise said her room was next to mine.”

He wondered what Julie got up to in her room and what she wore in bed. It was quite a while before he drifted off to sleep.

Henry's alarm woke him the next morning. He stretched and slowly remembered where he was. A mild depression hit him as he remembered he wasn't safely back at home.

“Oh well,” he thought. “I suppose I am getting a life in a way.”

He got out of bed and made his way to the bathroom and opened the door, then shut it again immediately, shocked. Julie was in there wearing only her bra and panties, doing things to her face.

“I'll be out in just a minute,” she called.

“More like half an hour,” said Denise as she came up the stairs in her dressing gown. “If you're desperate to pee you can use the laundry sink, just give it a good rinse afterwards.” She laughed. “Guess I should have warned you that Julie takes over the bathroom in the mornings. Best idea is to get up before she does.”

Henry smiled and backed into his room. He started to pace hoping that would diminish his need to pee. Twenty minutes later he made his way to the laundry.

They had breakfast in silence. Both Julie and Denise were fully occupied with their phones, Julie catching up with what her invisible

Facebook friends had been up to while she slept and Denise reading the news. Henry didn't have a mobile phone and he didn't feel strong enough to attempt to chat when they were both deeply engrossed.

"Are you ambitious?" Henry asked Julie when they got in the car to go to work.

"I guess so," she replied. "I don't want to be a clerk forever."

"What are you doing about it? Not being a clerk, I mean."

"I'm starting a diploma in Supply Chain Management when the next term begins. Then I'll be qualified to be a Purchasing Manager. Like Josh."

"Is that what you wanted to do?"

"Shit, no," said Julie, curling up her nose. "I wanted to be a Vet or at least a Veterinary Nurse but I didn't get the grades in Science in school, which was a bummer."

"So why Purchasing?"

"It was the only job I could get. And me dad always said 'whatever you do, do your best at it' and purchasing's what I'm doing so I'm going to do my best."

"What happened to your dad?"

"Oh, that bastard run off with some tart eight or nine years ago. I guess he'd been giving her his best which is why me mum only has me" and she cackled lewdly. "We're on our own so we have to make the best of it, don't we, like. Anyway I told Ashton-Mole what I wanted to do and they agreed to pay for it and give me time off to study for the exams."

"You mean you asked them to do that?"

"Sure. After they offered me the job, I went in and talked to whats-his-name in HR. Told him I wanted to do well and would they help me

study to do better. And he said sure.”

Henry was silent. It had never occurred to him to ask the company for help in getting qualifications. When they'd offered him the job as Accounts Clerk he'd just been grateful to get a job, any job. He hadn't thought any further ahead than that.

“Would they do the same for me?” he asked after a while.

“No idea. Wouldn't hurt to ask though would it. Is that what you want to do? Accounting?”

“Not really. I just took the first job that was offered. It's pretty boring.”

“What would you like to do?”

“I really don't know.”

“Well, what do you like to do outside work? Maybe you could figure out some way to do that as a job.”

“I don't really do anything outside work. I just usually watch TV or read.”

“Don't you even go out or anything, then?” Julie was incredulous.

“Well, I used to go out with my friends but they've both got girlfriends now and don't really want me around.”

“Wow,” said Julie. “Just, like, wow.”

When they got to work, Henry found he had an email from HR telling him to see Christian Dawson at 10am.

“Oh lord,” thought Henry. “I suppose Mr Cavendish has made a complaint about me.”

When Henry told Mr Cavendish he had to see HR at 10am the coldly cheerful look in his eye confirmed Henry's suspicions.

At two minutes to ten Henry knocked on the door of the HR office. He walked in and told the girl at the closest desk that he was here to see Christian Dawson.

"That's him," she said, pointing at the man behind the other desk.

"Henry?" said Christian. "Grab a seat."

Henry nervously sat down.

"Now," said Christian. "I've had a complaint about you from Mr Cavendish. It seems you were ...," he referred to his computer screen, "... 24 minutes late for work yesterday and didn't start work for another 18 minutes." He sighed gently and shook his head.

"I can explain," said Henry and told Christian about how he'd been kicked out of home and had spent the night in his car in a car park and how his suit had got all dirty and he'd needed a wash when he got to work.

"And did you explain all this to Mr Cavendish?"

"Yes, but he wouldn't listen."

"That man is such a dipstick," said Christian. "He should have told you that you were entitled to emergency leave because of your situation, not reported you for being a few minutes late. Where did you spend last night?"

"I stayed with, err, a friend. Her mother is letting me stay there for a while."

"Well, good for you" said Christian with a slight leer. "So the emergency is over?"

"Yes," said Henry.

"Good" said Christian. "Well, I shall be telling Mr Cavendish that he did not follow procedure and give him a reprimand. Not that that will make any difference. He can be a bit of a bastard. Unfortunately we

can't get rid of people for being bastards.”

“Oh dear,” thought Henry. “That means he'll take it out on me.”

“I don't suppose there are any other jobs I could do here?” he said diffidently. “Maybe with some training for a qualification.”

Christian gazed at him thoughtfully.

“What did you have in mind?” he asked.

Chapter Three

“Looking back over your life,” the salesman said, “did you ever think we'd live in a cashless society?”

“Oh yes,” Denise replied, “I've read a lot of science fiction which is full of it and they don't have any money in Star Trek.”

He smiled and nodded, clearly not that interested.

“If you would just sign here,” Denise signed where he pointed, “and the chairs will be at our depot in a week to ten days. We'll give you a ring when they've arrived and give you directions to the depot.”

“Great,” said Denise.

Mission accomplished she left the furniture store and walked slowly back to the car.

“Maybe I should have got the almond upholstery with the dark wood,” she wondered to herself, “although the black looked very striking and won't show the dirt. And black goes with anything. But the charcoal was nice too, and so was the light wood. Oh well, too late to change it now.”

When she arrived home Julie and Henry were just pulling up.

“Hi Blossom, hi Henry, good day at work?” she called.

“Hi Denise, yes” said Henry, never quite sure what to say to general enquiries like this. Julie ignored her mum while she updated her status in Facebook. It now read “living with a guy” which she thought was very funny and she wondered what responses she'd get.

“Will you still be here in a couple of weeks?” Denise asked Henry as he walked up the path, “only I've bought a couple of new chairs and I was hoping you'd be around to help me bring them home.”

Henry hadn't even thought of starting to find somewhere else to live.

"I'd love to, Denise," he said. "Do you have a van or anything?" and he gazed around as though expecting to see one on the driveway.

"God no," Denise replied with a half laugh. "We should be able to get one in my car and one in yours."

"Oh, OK then. Just let me know when you need me," said Henry.

"By the way, I've got you a door key. Half a sec." Denise fished around in her handbag and pulled out a key with a flourish. "There you go. Try it and see if it works."

Henry inserted the key in the lock and opened the door.

"Yes it works, thank you." He stepped back to let Denise through with a small wave of his hand. "After you."

"You're a gentleman," said Denise with a warm smile and squeezed past him.

"Put that phone down, it's time to eat" Denise said to Julie as she was dishing up dinner. "Go and tell Henry it's on the table."

Julie scampered up the stairs and pushed Henry's door open and called "dinner's ready" then dashed downstairs again. Henry followed a couple of minutes later.

"You'll never guess what Henry did today, mum." said Julie, picking up her knife and fork. Denise looked enquiringly at Henry who looked down at his plate self-consciously. Julie kicked him under the table and said "go on, tell her". Henry gave a small shake of his head and Julie giggled.

"He only went to HR and asked if they'd give him some training in something."

Henry had told Julie in the car on the way back but hadn't mentioned that the only reason he was in HR in the first place was to be reprimanded for being late for work.

“Oh, that's good,” said Denise. “As an accountant?”

“No, he doesn't want to stay in accounts” said Julie. “He wants to move to another department and do something different.”

“OK, what did they say?” Denise asked Henry.

“They said there's a vacancy in Sales right now and they'd make some enquiries about what other vacancies might be coming up soon.” said Julie.

“Can't Henry talk for himself?” Denise asked Julie who laughed out loud.

“It took me all the way home to get that much out of him. Henry doesn't talk much.”

“You could learn something from him then,” said Denise, then to Henry, “do you want to go into Sales?”

“Not a lot of point,” answered Julie. “He'd have to talk to people if he was a salesman.”

Henry looked up at this. “I can talk when I've something to talk about. It's chit chat I'm not good at.”

“Better stay out of Sales, then” said Denise. “It's the chit chat that gets you the sale. You need to relate to people. Anyone can recite a brochure. What would you like to do?”

“I don't know,” said Henry.

“He likes to read and watch TV, don't you, Henry,” said Julie. “Not many jobs doing that.”

Henry started to turn red again.

“Maybe he should become a clown,” teased Julie, “he wouldn't need to wear red makeup then, or at the zoo as a chameleon.”

“Be nice, Julie,” warned Denise. “We don't want Henry thinking he's not welcome here.”

Julie subsided and looked sideways at her phone. She reached for it and began thumbing it furiously.

“What do you normally do on a Friday night?” Denise asked.

“I usually stay in and watch TV or go round to my friend's but he's got a girlfriend now and I don't think I'm welcome at the moment,” Henry said forlornly.

“You don't have a girlfriend?” Denise asked.

“Not at the moment,” said Henry.

“He's never had a girlfriend,” Julie interjected, focused on her phone. “They think he's gay at work.”

“Julie!” admonished her mother. “Don't you want a girlfriend?” she asked Henry.

Henry opened his mouth to speak.

“He's too scared to talk to girls,” said Julie, thumbing again. “No way” she said to her phone with a frown and stepped up the pace of her thumbing.

Henry closed his mouth. This was all getting too much for him.

“Well, you're welcome to watch TV with me although I'm sure I'll be dull company for you,” said Denise.

“That's very kind of you,” said Henry, wishing he could hide in his room for the evening.

“You wanna come out with me and some mates?” said Julie, glancing up from her phone momentarily. “We're going clubbing. Just sorting out where.”

Henry was about to say no when Denise said "That's very nice of you Blossom. I'm sure Henry would love to go, ..." she glanced over at Henry "... wouldn't you," with only the slightest emphasis.

She was tired and fancied an evening alone in front of the telly, not having to work hard trying to make conversation with a tongue-tied young man.

"You don't drink, do you," said Julie. "You can be the driver, cool"

Flustered Henry didn't know what to do so he just nodded acquiescence. Then he had a thought.

"I don't have much money on me," he said.

"That's OK" said Julie, without looking up. "We never buy any drinks." She suddenly stopped texting and looked up. "Oh, I don't expect many guys will buy you any drinks" and laughingly went back to her phone. "Be ready around 8," she added.

"Be nearer to 10," said Denise, "or even later."

Henry felt drained already. He was usually in bed by 10. Denise smiled. There was a Robert Redford movie on late tonight. She'd be able to watch it in peace.

Chapter Four

After dinner Henry went to have a nap. He thought that it would help since he was going to be out late. He set his alarm for 9.30 thinking that half an hour would be more than enough time to wash and get ready. He put on the suit he'd worn at work as the other one hadn't been washed yet and he gave his shoes a wipe with some damp tissue paper.

Julie was ready by 10.15 or so and was dressed to kill, her blonde hair in a high side ponytail and barely recognisable in makeup. She would have looked a little older if Henry had been able to look at her but she was doing things to his hormones and he didn't have the courage to look directly at her.

"You're seriously going out in that?" she said looking him up and down. "You look like you're going to work."

"I've nothing else," stammered Henry.

"Wow," said Julie. "At least lose the tie."

Henry pulled off his tie.

"And undo your collar otherwise you'll look like a total loser. Come on, we're late. Bye mum, don't wait up."

"I was ready half an hour ago," said Henry to himself. "Goodbye, Denise."

"Have fun. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Henry wasn't too sure he'd even do what Denise would do let alone anything she wouldn't.

"Where are we going?" said Henry when they were in the car.

"Lockerbys," said Julie.

"Where's that?" asked Henry.

“Bottom of the High Street.”

Julie checked herself in the rear view mirror then pulled out her phone.

“Kasey asked if the guy I’m living with is cute,” she reported to Henry. “I told her it was you and she hasn’t replied.”

Ten seconds later the phone pinged. “Oh, now she has,” a pause then “Oh.”

“What did she say?” asked Henry.

“Doesn’t matter,” said Julie, putting her phone in her jacket pocket. “We’ll meet the others at the club.”

Henry wondered if Kasey thought he was creepy, like Mr Cavendish.

“Who will be there?”

“My mate Shazza, Anne, Becs, probably Kasey with her boyfriend and ...” Julie reeled off a seemingly endless list, the only one of which he recognised was Kasey.

Julie started humming a song he didn’t recognise and making little movements with her hands and feet.

“Where in the High Street is Lockerbys?” asked Henry.

“Haven’t you been there?” replied Julie.

“No,” he said honestly.

“Oh,” she said. “I thought everyone knew Lockerbys. It’s the only half decent club in town. Oh and Dennys.” She thought for a moment. “And The Carlton is pretty cool too. Black Cats is shit though, full of boozing creeps. Where d’you normally go? Level Three?” and she laughed.

“Why are you laughing at Level Three?” asked Henry, trying to avoid

admitting he'd never been to a nightclub.

"That's where the gays go. Oh, you've just driven past it."

"Level Three?"

"No, Lockerbys."

Henry checked his rear view mirror to see what was behind him before attempting to do a U-turn and found it was pointing out the side window. He adjusted it then indicated right before turning.

"I wonder where I can park," he said. "It seems very busy for this time of night."

"There's a car park round the back," said Julie. "I've been there before" and giggled to herself.

With a few false turns Henry found the car park and Julie checked herself in the mirror again. They got out and while Henry locked the car Julie pulled down the hem of her dress to smooth any wrinkles then hitched it up again a couple of inches. Around the front there was a queue of girls dressed much like Julie and guys dressed completely unlike Henry. He felt a little self conscious.

"Juuuuu-lieeeee," screamed a girl's voice from a passing car on the other side of the road.

"Oh! There's Shazza," said Julie excitedly, jumping up and down and waving at a car with a girl half hanging out of the window waving frantically over its roof. "She must have a new chap, Steve doesn't have a car. Shaaaa-zzzzzz!"

It took five minutes or so to get to the head of the queue. There was a continuous "boom-boom" dully resonating from somewhere and the pavement seemed to be vibrating slightly. The doorman waved Julie in and stopped Henry with an arm the size of a side of beef.

"That's a tenner, mate," he said in a voice that resonated from the depths.

“But Julie just went in,” protested Henry, very bravely he thought.

“Chicks get in free mate. You been livin’ in a cave or what?” the voice growled.

Intimidated, Henry pulled out his wallet. There were only two tens in it. He handed one over to the doorman who raised something in his hand.

“Jesus,” he growled. “Give us yer hand.”

Henry held out his hands in panic. The doorman hit one of them and left a mark then jerked his head towards the entrance.

“There’s a queue mate, get in there.”

Henry got in there as quick as he could.

There was a short, poorly lit corridor and a couple of people standing at the far end. He walked over to them. One was a man who looked to be a close relation of the man on the door only with even shorter cropped hair. He flashed a small light at Henry then growled something Henry couldn’t make out over the “boom boom” which was considerably louder.

“Show us yer hand, mate,” the doorman said again.

Henry held out both hands again and the doorman checked the stamp.

“OK,” he said to the girl beside him who appeared to be naked in the semi-light. The torch flashed again at someone behind Henry and he briefly saw that the girl was in fact wearing an extremely small, extremely tight dress and that she was holding a door open.

“Hurry up,” said a girl’s voice behind him and Henry stumbled inside and was immediately enveloped in some thick, heavy, utterly black material. “Shit,” said the girl’s voice as she pushed past him and Henry realised it was a curtain. He grabbed the edge as someone else pushed past and pulled it to the side so he could get by.

A frantic cacophony of noise and flashing lights assailed him and he lurched as someone pushed him hard from behind. He grimly hung on to the wall as his eyes tried to make some sense of what was going on. Slowly the chaos resolved itself into comprehensible images. There were flashing lights directly ahead which picked out an area where people seemed to be dancing in jerky slow motion. Over to the right was a dimly lit bar that was packed with people and over to the left were what looked to be seats of some sort. Every now and then a stray flash of light lit up some jewellery or a blonde head. The rest of the place was in darkness. There was no sign of Julie.

Controlling his panic, Henry decided to venture forth into this hell and find her. He was tempted to leave but couldn't see where he had come in and anyway, the doormen would only laugh at him. So would Julie. Obviously she thought this place was fun otherwise she wouldn't come here. He didn't have the courage to venture out into the open spaces so he carefully walked off to the left, keeping one hand against the wall for safety. The noise was confusing him.

After hurting his leg on an unseen chair, Henry thought he saw Julie over between the dance floor and the bar, lit up several times a second, so he pulled himself up to his full height and launched himself in that direction. Shadowy bodies milled around him and he lost his direction a couple of times. When he was within a few feet he recognised Julie who seemed to be in some sort of hugging contest with several other girls who were all ignoring everything going on around them and were busily screaming amongst themselves.

He touched her arm and she glanced around and he saw her lips move.

“What was that?” he shouted.

Julie wagged her finger beside her ear and then brought her mouth up close to his ear and Henry managed to make out “There you are” over the music. He smiled vaguely at her, his head beginning to ache.

Julie kept mouthing in his ear and pointing to each of the other girls in turn but Henry could only make out one word, “Anne”, although he recognised Kasey from work and nodded at her. Kasey laughed at

him. Julie shouted in his ear again and pushed her bag into his chest. He just made out “.... bag, we’re dance,” and then she disappeared towards the dance floor. He watched them go, robot-like in staccato, jerky movements, until Julie was lost in the melee under the lights. He had no idea what to do so he stood there patiently, unmoving, like a grey suited dog waiting for its mistress to return, her small bag clutched tightly in his hand.

Julie did return eventually followed by a lad roughly Henry’s age. She grabbed her bag and shouted in his ear again. He must be getting accustomed to the sound level he realised since he was able to make out almost every word.

“... want a drink? He’s getting them,” and jerked her hand towards the lad who’d followed her.

“I’d love some tea,” shouted Henry but she was already shouting into the ear of the chap who disappeared in the direction of the bar. To his surprise, Julie grabbed his hand and started dragging him in the opposite direction.

“Where are we going?” he bawled at the top of his voice.

“Shazzas gottus atab ugh” he thought he heard in reply. He had no idea what that meant.

After crashing into several people Henry found himself in front of a table full of girls shouting at each other and Julie pushed him into a chair. There were three or four men standing around the table trying to talk to some of the girls and one or two were even trying to listen and make replies. Julie pointed to a girl who was straddling a man sitting in one of the chairs and seemed to be trying to eat his face.

“That’s Shazza,” shouted Julie at Henry then reached over and whacked Shazza on her arm.

“Shaz,” she shouted even more loudly, “this is Henry.”

Shazza briefly disengaged from the man’s face and flashed a smile at Henry before resuming. Henry noticed that the man appeared to have

one hand inside Shazza's top and looked away in shock. Surely he was wrong since Shazza wasn't doing anything about it. He looked back and yes, the man definitely had his hand inside and seemed to be no, surely not. Henry turned to concentrate on Julie.

"That's Shazza's new boyfriend," yelled Julie. "She met him last night and we need to keep an eye out for Steve since she's still going out with him."

"I don't know what Steve looks like," he shouted back.

"There'll be a fight if he sees her," Julie shouted back.

The lad who had followed Julie off the dance floor reappeared carrying three glasses. He gave one to Henry and passed another to Julie who took a sip and turned her attention fully onto him. Henry picked up the glass to discover it was some kind of cheap and not particularly strong plastic. He was thirsty since it was hot in there and he took a long swallow. It seemed to be some kind of thin beer but wasn't too bad. Henry had another swallow.

He wanted to ask Julie some questions about this place but she jumped up and disappeared towards the dance floor with the drinks chap, holding his hand.

Henry felt exhausted and he was glad he was sitting down. He glanced round the table and the other girls seemed to have disappeared although Shazza was still sitting on that man. Looking around he could see a few happy faces at the nearby tables and one girl leaning on her table, sobbing her heart out.

"I hope she's not ill," thought Henry. "I wonder if I should go over and offer to help?"

While he was debating this, two more girls descended on the crying girl and started to stroke her hair and gave her tissues while talking at her. Henry couldn't make out a single word but she slowly stopped crying and pulled out a small mirror and started dabbing at her face. Julie returned from the dance floor with a different man in tow.

“Another drink?” she shouted.

Henry shook his head. He was still barely halfway through the first one. He glanced over at the crying girl and saw the man who'd got him his drink was now bent over her, talking, and she was smiling up at him. Julie's new man disappeared and Julie took a mouthful of Henry's drink. There were quite a few almost full plastic glasses on the table. Shazza got off the man she was with and he stood up and they both disappeared into the darkness further away from the table.

“Having fun?” shouted Julie at him but turned away before he could answer to talk to yet another man who was trying to get her attention. She disappeared off to the dance floor with him moments before the second man came back with a drink for her.

“Where'd she go?” he yelled at Henry. “That blonde who was sitting here?”

Henry nodded towards the dance floor. The man glowered at him.

“But I got her a friggin drink!” he shouted.

He sat down where Julie had been sitting.

“You know her?” he yelled at Henry.

“Her name's Julie,” shouted back Henry. “I live with her.”

“No fucking way,” he shouted back. “That blonde lives with you? No way.”

“Yes,” shouted Henry, feeling absurdly pleased for some reason.

“Fuck,” shouted the man and stalked off.

Henry slowly finished his beer, waiting for Julie to come back. The other girls reappeared and disappeared, sometimes with men and sometimes alone or with another girl. There was constant movement all around him and the noise was slowly fading into the background. His head was throbbing. He took the drink the man who had talked to

him had got Julie and started to slowly sip it. The girl who had been crying was back at her table with yet another man. She didn't seem to be too upset after all, which was a bit of a shame as Henry had rather liked the idea of being a knight in shining armour and going to her rescue.

After a while Julie reappeared on her own.

"I took your drink" Henry shouted. "Sorry. Have you been dancing all this time?"

"Not really," shouted Julie back vaguely. Shazza reappeared on her own and she and Julie went into a huddle.

Not long afterwards, the incessant "boom boom" unexpectedly slowed down to a fraction of the speed and several men converged on Julie and Shazza. Both girls got up and went off to the dance floor with a man each and the other men looked around for other girls to entice. The closely packed gyrating individuals on the dance floor had coalesced into closely packed swaying couples. He could just make out Julie near the edge of the dance floor, partially obscured by another couple. She was tightly locked in the arms of the man she'd gone off with, her head against his chest. They disappeared from sight in the crowd.

The music came to an end and a roar went up from the dance floor and there was a ripple of applause. Then another piece of slow music started and several couples left the dance floor and others joined. Julie must have been somewhere in the middle as Henry couldn't see her or Shazza anywhere. This piece of music came to an end as well and slow clapping started as the flashing light stopped and the main lighting came on. Julie reappeared from the dance floor and made her way back to the table, the man she'd been dancing with closely behind. He sat down next to her and started talking to her.

Julie glanced over to Henry several times then shook her head. The man seemed to repeat what he'd said and Julie leaned over to Henry.

"Have you got a pen?" she asked.

“Certainly,” said Henry, pulling one from his inside pocket. He always carried a pen.

Julie took it and wrote something on the palm of the man's hand and passed the pen back to Henry. She stood up and grabbed her bag.

“... to go now,” Henry heard her say.

“Oh thank the lord,” thought Henry as Julie collected him with her eyes and he followed her to the exit.

Outside the air was cool and fresh. Henry looked at his watch and saw it was gone 3am. He felt strangely lightheaded and a bit woozy. His head was thumping as loudly as the music had been and his ears were ringing. Julie leaned up against the wall as people came out of the club on their own, in pairs and in groups and headed off into the night, many of them staggering.

“Did you have a good time?” asked Julie.

“It was ... interesting,” said Henry. “What did you write on that man's hand?”

“He insisted I gave him my phone number so I did to get rid of him. Can you give Shazza a lift home?”

Henry was curious and strangely uninhibited. “If you wanted to get rid of him why did you give him your number?”

Julie laughed wryly. “I gave him a fake number.”

Henry pondered this for a few moments. “Can't Shazza's boyfriend give her a lift home? He's got a car.”

“She dumped him,” explained Julie. “Turned out he was married. You sure you're OK to drive? How much did you have to drink?”

“Two,” said Henry, proudly. He'd never had more than one before.

“Ohh, there's Shaz. Come on, let's go.”

Julie's phone started to ring and she looked at it then answered it.

"Hello," pause, "who?" another pause.

"Did I dance with someone called Tom?" she hissed at Shazza after a couple of moments.

"How would I know?" said Shazza.

"I think you've got the wrong number," Julie said politely into her phone and hung up. The phone rang again almost immediately but Julie ignored it until it stopped.

Chapter Five

The door to Henry's room opened slowly and he turned his head to see who was there. Silhouetted in the light from the hallway stood Julie, her golden hair glowing like a back lit halo and her perfect body, clad only in bra and panties, radiated desire. She crept over to the bed and slowly pulled back the covers leaving Henry's upper body exposed. She slipped effortlessly into the bed beside him and pulled his head close to hers.

"Take me, Henry, take me now," she breathed.

"Oh Julie," sighed Henry, "how I've longed for this moment. Where shall I take you?"

Sensuously Julie slid her hand down Henry's torso and gently took his hand in hers. She raised it to her lips and softly kissed it then wrote a message on the back of Henry's hand. He smiled, eyes filled with love, and raised his hand to read the message.

"Take me to the supermarket, I need phone credit."

Henry groaned and woke up. The curtains were open and the sun was streaming onto his face and he was sweating. He groaned again and rolled over. He pushed back the covers and tried to get his legs out and onto the floor but they were entangled. He groaned again and fell back against the pillow. With a supreme effort of will he slowly kicked his legs until he felt they were free and tried again. This time his feet made it to the floor. Groggily Henry stared at his feet. He still had his shoes on. And his socks. And his suit trousers by the look of it since his pyjamas were pale blue. Henry peeled back the sleeve of his jacket to read Julie's message. It was only after he saw there was no message that he realised he had his suit jacket on as well. Henry groaned again.

Henry staggered to the bathroom and had a pee then staggered back to his room. That was another suit that needed cleaning. He had to get them both cleaned today or he'd have nothing to wear on Monday. He stripped off and dug out a pair of jeans and a red t-shirt with a green Christmas Robin on it. Wrapping a towel around himself he staggered back to the bathroom and had a quick shower. It didn't

really revive him but at least he felt fairly clean again.

"Afternoon," said Denise in the kitchen. "I made you a coffee a couple of hours ago when I thought I heard you stir. It'll be cold now. Love the shirt."

Henry tried to say "Good morning" but it came out squeaky and raspy as the sides of his throat felt glued together. Denise just looked at him then reached over and put the coffee mug in the microwave for one minute.

Clutching the hot coffee mug in his hands, Henry staggered into the lounge. Julie burst out laughing.

"Great shirt, not. It's only August. I've been up for hours."

Henry ignored her.

"Don't forget you said you'd take me into town today. I need to get phone credit from the supermarket."

Henry ignored her.

Denise looked at Julie. "How much did he have to drink last night?"

"He said he only had two beers."

"Guess he's not used to it then."

"He was under the limit when the cops stopped us so they let us go."

"Oh that's all right then," said Denise sarcastically. "You should have kept a closer eye on him, you know he's not used to clubs and drinking."

"Mu-uu-m, he was with Shazza most of the night. She kept an eye on him."

"Oh I don't believe that for one minute," said Denise. "Shazza wouldn't look at someone like Henry twice. Oh well, he's 24 and not

my problem.” She shrugged her shoulders.

Henry drank his coffee and felt life returning. At least his headache was going.

“Did you have a good time last night?” asked Denise.

“I think so,” said Henry. “It was all very loud though.”

Julie laughed and went back to her phone.

“Both my suits are dirty and I don't have anything for work on Monday.”

“Be too late for a dry cleaner now. Are they machine washable?” said Denise.

“I don't know,” said Henry.

“Go get them and we'll look at the labels.”

Henry went and got both his suits and showed them to Denise.

“Jesus, what did you do with these?” she said, picking them over and wrinkling her nose. “Looks like you've slept in both of them.”

“I did,” said Henry mournfully. “It's been a funny week.”

“They're both machine washable. Just as well they aren't good quality suits as they'd need to be dry cleaned. Do you know how to use a washing machine?”

Henry shook his head. His mum had always done his washing until now.

“Come on then, I'll show you. But I'm not doing all your washing for you, mind. I've got better things to do. Got anything else that needs washing? Shirts? Underwear?”

Henry nodded.

“Go get them then,” said Denise. “They won't wash themselves.”

Henry went back upstairs again and brought down all his clothes since he wasn't too sure what was clean and what wasn't.

“I've brought everything,” he told Denise. “Time to make a clean start.” and he laughed halfheartedly.

Denise looked at the small pile of clothes on the laundry floor.

“Are you serious? That's all the clothes you've got?”

Henry nodded.

“You need to get some more. And get some things that are a little less old fashioned. Julie'll go with you, she loves clothes shopping. Anyway, you'll need to set it to cold and delicates for the suits. Then leave them hanging to dry. They'll be fine tomorrow.”

Denise deftly showed Henry the basic controls of the washing machine and how much powder to put in it.

“If you keep you ears open you'll hear when it stops.”

Back in the lounge Henry sat in the armchair next to Julie. She flashed him a smile and put her phone down.

“I've apologised to Anne for you but it wouldn't hurt to do it yourself sometime soon.”

“Apologise? Why? What did I do?”

“You were sick over her shoes. Don't you remember?”

Henry vaguely remembered a dark haired girl that Julie said needed a lift home as well.

“Was she a dark haired girl I gave a lift home?” he asked.

“No that was Shazza. Anne's blonde like me only hers is short.” She waved her hand at shoulder level.

"Then I don't remember her. I don't even remember being sick and I don't remember driving her home."

"It wasn't much, and don't worry too much about it. Someone's always sick when we go clubbing. The guys always drink too much. And you didn't drive her home. I did."

Henry looked at her sharply.

"I didn't think you could drive," he said.

"I haven't got my licence yet but I've had some lessons," said Julie. "We didn't think you should drive after the cops stopped us."

"What? The police stopped me?"

"Yes, they said you were weaving a bit but since you were under the limit, they let you off with a verbal."

"A verbal?"

"Yeah, a telling off, a warning. Don't do it again, like. Anyway Anne said you shouldn't really drive and Shaz said she was too pissed to drive and Kate was asleep so I drove."

"Kate? Who's Kate?"

"We gave her a lift too."

"Where was I during all this?"

"You were on the back seat with Anne and Kate, throwing up over Anne's shoes." Julie smiled derisively. "Then you passed out. I put you to bed, wasn't going to undress you though." Then she snorted.

"So how many people did we give lifts too?"

"Just four, and me and you."

Henry did the maths. "Who was the other one?" He only had a small

car. How on earth had they fitted six people in?

“Steve, Shazza's boyfriend. He turned up just before we left and went home with Shaz. He can't drive. He lost his licence for a year.”

Henry nodded slowly. He was having trouble taking all this in.

“Where are my car keys?” he asked suddenly.

“I left them beside your bed.”

The mark on his hand caught his eye. Then he remembered the doorman at the club had stamped him with it. It was quite smudged but it looked like it was some sort of red dragon.

“Why did they stamp my hand at the club?” he asked.

Julie laughed. “That's so you can get back in if you go out. It'll wash off in a day or two.”

Henry felt very ignorant and foolish. This was a side of life he didn't know much about. He sat in silence for a while, looking at the floor. Julie watched him for a minute or so then picked up her phone. Then he became aware of the washing machine starting to spin.

“Your mum thinks I should get some new clothes,” he said.

Julie put her phone down. Clothes were one of her favourite subjects.

“Definitely,” she said.

“What's wrong with the ones I've got?”

“You look like a total tosser,” she said bluntly. “Your suits are so old fashioned my grand-dad wouldn't be seen in them and that”, she pointed at his Christmas Robin t-shirt, “is beyond awful.”

“But my auntie gave it to me for Christmas,” Henry protested.

“It's always a bummer when relatives give you clothes,” Julie

sympathised. "I've had some stuff I wouldn't be seen dead in. What else have you got?"

"I've got some more clothes at home," Henry said hopefully. "I ought to go round and collect the rest of my clothes and my books and stuff anyway, and give them my address."

"I'll come with you if you like. Then we can go through your clothes and chuck out the naff stuff. Save bringing it here."

"Thank you, that would be very kind of you." Henry had a sudden thought about how his parents would react to Julie. "Although I'm sure you're far too busy."

"We'll go tomorrow," she said firmly. "Sunday's always boring anyway."

Henry nodded. Sundays were pretty boring and he couldn't think of a way of getting out of it now anyway.

"And I'll come with you to get new clothes," she added. "That'll be fun. Do you a make-over. Get you some cool gear. Probably make the world of difference."

She had a sudden thought and reached for her phone. "I'll get Shaz to come too. She wants to get Steve something so we can ..."

"No," said Henry unusually decisively because he couldn't face going clothes shopping with a group of girls. If last night was anything to go by he'd end up with four or five of them, maybe even more and god only knows what clothes he'd end up with. And besides, he rather liked the idea of going out somewhere with just Julie on her own. Maybe they could have a coke together. "Just you."

Julie laughed and put down her phone again. "OK," she said. "No problem. The washing machine's finished. Then can you take me to get phone credit?"

After Julie had found him some plastic hangers, "never dry clothes on metal hangers, they'll get a permanent crease" she'd said, Henry got his car keys from beside his bed. When he turned on the ignition he

was surprised to see the fuel gauge read barely a quarter of a tank. It had been a little over half a tank the day before.

“How far did you drive last night?” he asked Julie.

“Oh not far,” she said. “Shazz was going to Steve's and he's in Stoke Northam and Anne lives in Bishopsford and Bec's the other side of town.”

Henry did a quick estimate and whistled. “That's about 80 miles in all. Must have taken a while.” And a lot of my petrol he thought.

“No idea,” said Julie. “You didn't mind, did you?”

“No, of course not?” lied Henry. Petrol was expensive. Ten to get into the nightclub and another twelve or so for fuel. It was just as well he hadn't had to buy any drinks. How did other people afford to go out all the time?

“It's only four,” said Julie. “Why don't we go for a coffee or something after the supermarket?”

“OK,” said Henry, “that'll be nice.” His heart pounded. This was definitely looking good, he thought. “Where shall we go?”

“There's a place in the mall a bit down from the supermarket,” said Julie, pulling out her phone. “Let's go there.”

After Julie got her phone credit they headed down to El Greco Coffee and Cakes in the mall. Julie spotted a table at the back.

“I'll have a cappuccino,” she said to Henry and headed for the table.

Henry joined her a couple of minutes later carrying a little pole with a numbered flag on it.

“That's so they know which table to bring the coffees to,” explained Julie when she noticed his puzzled look as he played with it.

“Oh,” said Henry. “I should have figured that out myself” he thought.

“What are you having?” said Julie.

“A mug of tea,” he replied. “I’m feeling a little dehydrated.”

“I wonder if this is a date?” he thought to himself, giving Julie surreptitious glances. “What on earth can I say?”

“Do you buy clothes here?” he asked. “In this mall?”

“Nooooo,” said Julie. “They’re just the cheap junky department stores here. All the decent clothes are in the boutiques in the High Street.

Boutiques? They sounded expensive to Henry. He was trying to figure out how to explain to Julie he didn’t have a lot of money for clothes when the drinks arrived. Julie’s cappuccino had a sweet little heart on the top.

“How do they do that?” asked Henry, pointing to the heart.

“They have a stencil and shake powdered chocolate over it,” she said offhandedly. “Oh, there they are.” She jumped up and waved. Two girls came over and sat at the table with them.

The one who sat next to Julie looked at Henry and said “Get a load of that shirt” and laughed. The other girl, who had sat next to Henry, craned round to look and giggled. A strong smell of perfume drowned out the coffee smell of the cafe.

“Cathy and Jen,” said Julie. “That’s Henry,” and the three of them launched into a complex discussion that seemed to involve all three of them talking at the same time and, as far as Henry could make out, followed at least four different threads and seemed to involve several other people. He leaned back in his chair and watched and listened, feeling decidedly left out. The flow was too fast and too convoluted to make any attempt to join in even if he hadn’t been so intimidated. He quietly drank his tea, speculating how a new shirt would make much difference.

“Maybe if I looked more cool girls would want to talk to me,” he thought. “I wonder what cool looks like?” As far as he could see the

other men in the cafe were wearing much the same as he normally wore although admittedly no one else was wearing a Christmas t-shirt.

* * *

"I checked your suits just now," said Denise over dinner. "They're almost dry."

"I'm going with Henry to his old place to check out his clothes there," said Julie. "See if he's got anything with any kind of street cred."

"That'll be fun for you," said Denise. She eyed Henry. "But don't get your hopes up."

Henry squirmed in his chair. Julie laughed.

"When are you going?" Denise asked Henry.

"Tomorrow, hopefully," answered Julie. "He wants to pick up his stuff and I said I'd look over his clothes and chuck out what's not worth keeping."

"That's a good idea. Save bringing it all here."

"Henry wants me to take him shopping for new clothes too."

"Don't go anywhere too trendy," cautioned Denise. "He's got to be able to carry them as well as wear them."

"I know," said Julie, also eyeing Henry. "It's not going to be that easy. I was thinking Garcon's in the High Street for openers."

"Ohhh, they've some nice stuff there" said Denise. "Although maybe they're a bit much to start with."

"Yeah maybe. What about Wilson Harvey?"

"No, I don't really see Henry in that kind of clothing. He doesn't have the build for it."

"Yeah, that's true" said Julie with a frown. "And we can't get anything

red since that'll clash with his face," and the frown turned into a giggle. Henry was glowing again.

"We'll try a few places. There's got to be somewhere."

"How about Maximilian's?" asked Denise.

"Noooooo," said Julie. "That's for old men. Like over thirty. Henry's not that old yet."

"Umm," said Henry. They both turned to look at him. He lost courage and got on with eating his dinner.

"You going out again tonight, Blossom?" asked Denise.

"Sure am," replied Julie. "Dunno where though."

"Is Henry going with you?"

"If he wants."

They both looked at Henry again. He looked from one to the other, then inspiration hit.

"I don't have anything to wear," he said. "Everything's still in the wash. I could use an early night anyway."

Chapter Six

Henry got an early night that night, leaving Denise to watch her Matt Damon DVD in peace after they'd made desultory conversation for an hour or so. He hadn't washed or cleaned his teeth before going to bed as Julie had taken over the bathroom. Still, Henry drifted off to sleep quickly, and barely even a thought of Julie dancing with a multitude of men or doing her makeup in the bathroom disturbed his sleep.

"Did you sleep well?" asked Denise when he came down bright and early in the morning.

"Yes, thank you, Denise," he replied. "I feel rested and ready to take on anything."

"That's good. Julie won't be up for another two or three hours. She didn't get back 'til around five, so it'll be a few hours yet before she's ready to go to your parents'."

For some reason the thought of going to visit his parents' didn't please him as much as he thought it should have done.

"So I was wondering," continued Denise, "if you'd cut the grass for me."

"The grass?" said Henry, taken aback by the sudden change in topic.

"Yes," said Denise, "you know, that green stuff out the back."

Henry wondered if she was being sarcastic or if she really thought he was that ignorant.

"I'd be happy to. Do you have a lawn mower?"

"It's in the shed. You're a sweet boy."

Henry cringed. There was a time when he would have been happy to be called sweet but somehow he didn't think Julie liked sweet boys. None of the men she'd talked to and danced with seemed to be sweet. Sweet was how your grannie thought about you, not the love of your

life.

After finishing his breakfast Henry went out to the shed to get the lawn mower. It was not the type he normally used on the rare occasion he mowed his parents' lawn, his father preferring to cut the grass himself. Theirs was a lightweight electric mower that hovered above the ground. This was a cumbersome petrol driven thing that didn't seem to want to come out of the shed. With a heave that caused loud clicks in his shoulders, Henry wrestled it over the lip of the shed doorway and manhandled it down the short path to the grass. He stood and studied it, reasoning that in principle it should be like his car since it was petrol driven too. There was a lever on one side of the handlebar and a knob that looked to have two positions on the other side which were probably the throttle and a gear stick. There was no slot for an ignition key but there was a rubber covered button that probably operated the starter so Henry pressed it. Nothing happened. He pressed it again and nothing happened again.

Behind him the kitchen window slid open and Denise called out.

"You have to pull the cord. It's that little handle on the right side. And you'll need the choke out too, which is that lever on the other side of the engine."

"Ahh OK, thank you," Henry called back.

He pulled the choke lever all the way over then went round the other side and pulled the cord. The whole lawn mower slid towards him.

"Brace it with your foot then pull," came Denise's voice.

Henry braced the mower with his foot and pulled on the cord again. The motor turned over and he felt a sharp twinge of pain in his shoulder. He tried again and this time the engine burst into noisy life and blue smoke came pouring out of the engine cover.

"Should it be making so much smoke?" he called to Denise.

"Just 'til it's warmed up," floated back at him.

“OK, so far so good” thought Henry to himself. He slid the gear lever on the handlebar forward and the mower lurched forward and died.

“Oh dear,” muttered Henry. He went round the side of the mover again, braced it with his foot and pulled the handle. The mower lurched forward and spluttered angrily but didn't start. Henry reached up and slid the gear lever back so it wasn't in gear and tried again. The engine caught, ran smoothly for four or five seconds and died. He pulled the handle again, with another sharp pain in his shoulder but the engine didn't start. He tried again. And again. And again.

“Maybe it's out of petrol,” called Denise. “Check the tank.”

Henry studied the mower again. There was a small black box on top of the engine which looked like it might be a fuel tank so he opened it. A smell of petrol wafted out and he stuck his finger inside and it came out dry so it probably was empty.

“Do you have any more fuel?” he called out.

“Red can in the shed, oh shit,” followed by a clatter of things falling.

“Are you all right?” Henry called.

“Yes, but the handle's come off my frying pan. Are you any good at welding?”

“fraid not,” called Henry as he went in search of a red can in the shed. He found one under a sack of compost which sounded like it had liquid in when he shook it. He took it out into the light and unscrewed the cap. It smelt like petrol. He poured some into the tank on the mower and replaced the cap on the mower tank and the cap on the fuel can. After three attempts the mower roared into life and his shoulder was throbbing.

This time he was ready when he pushed the gear lever and held on to the handlebars as it lurched forward, spewing grass cuttings over his legs. Determined to get the job done he ignored that and concentrated on guiding the mower as it sedately chugged its way across the grass. Narrowly avoiding a flower bed of brightly coloured whatevers Henry

managed to navigate a wavy path through the grass. It was only a small lawn so when he was done he navigated back up the short path to the shed and crashed the lawn mower into the garden fence before he remembered to take the mower out of gear. Fortunately the engine stalled so he was able to manhandle it back into the shed.

Exhausted and rubbing his sore shoulder Henry returned to the kitchen in search of tea. Julie was there, a bare five hours after getting home and looking as fresh as a daisy while scrolling through her phone messages in her dressing gown.

“Thanks for that sweetie,” said Denise.

Julie looked up with a grin. “Yes, sweetie,” she echoed, with an emphasis on the second word.

“Would you sweep up the grass for me?” said Denise, gesturing at the trail of clippings Henry had left on the kitchen floor. He grabbed the broom behind the kitchen door and started sweeping.

“He's such a sweetie, isn't he mum,” said Julie a touch sarcastically.

“Yes he is and don't you take advantage, my girl,” Denise said to Julie who looked back at her with wide-eyed innocence.

“I would never take advantage of such a sweetie as Henry,” cooed Julie. “Ohh look, he's gone red again.” She laughed and batted her eyelashes at him.

“She can be a bitch sometimes,” said Denise to Henry. “Take no notice of her. She'll grow up one day.”

Julie was back on her phone and didn't see Henry looking at her. He thought she was pretty grown up already, sitting there nonchalantly in her dressing gown with quite possibly nothing on underneath.

“We're just off to Henry's parents, mum,” called Julie a while later.

Denise looked up from her book.

“Don't let Julie stop anywhere on the way,” she said to Henry, “or you'll spend the afternoon watching her talk to her friends and never get there.”

“I found that out yesterday,” said Henry, braving a small grin.

“At least I've got some friends, unlike some people I know,” said Julie. “Well don't just stand there, sweetie. Let's go.”

Henry's parents lived in a neat, detached house in a leafy crescent on the other side of town, their rigidly ordered front garden flanked by equally well tended gardens on either side. The windows were tightly closed and the house had an air of order and efficiency.

“What are your parent's names?” asked Julie as Henry pulled up outside.

“George and Mabel Curshaw,” he answered. “Although dad doesn't like to be called George.”

“What does he like then?”

“Mr Curshaw.”

“Oh,” said Julie. “Does your mother like to be called Mrs Curshaw?”

“She won't talk to you so it doesn't really matter,” said Henry. “Dad does all the talking.”

Julie looked puzzled and opened her mouth to say something then closed it again. They got out of the car and Henry pulled his suitcase from the boot. He led the way up the path and knocked on the front door.

“Still haven't learnt to be punctual then, have you, boy. You're seven minutes late,” growled Mr Curshaw as he opened the door. “Well, don't just stand there, get inside. And who are you?”

“This is Julie,” said Henry.

“Hmmpf,” said Mr Curshaw, looking her up and down in a way that men didn’t usually look at her.

“Thank you, sweetie,” said Julie as Henry stepped aside to let her go through first.

“Hello mum,” said Henry. “Mum, this is Julie.”

Mrs Curshaw smiled gently and touched Julie's outstretched hand.

“We’ll have some tea,” said Mr Curshaw. “Go and make some, Mabel.”

Henry started to follow Mrs Curshaw into the kitchen.

“The lounge, boy, not the kitchen when we have a guest. How many times do I have to tell you?” said Mr Curshaw.

“Sorry, dad,” said Henry quietly. He went into the lounge.

“So, young, mmm, lady,” said Mr Curshaw when they were seated. “How do you know my son?”

“He's staying with me mum and me,” said Julie, staring back at him, aware of a faint smell of stale air freshener.

“What does your father think?”

“No idea. He buggered off years ago.” She gave a small laugh.

“So my son is living with two women on their own?” He scowled. “I can't say I approve of that. What do you have to say for yourself, boy?”

Henry stayed silent, looking at his feet. Julie's face grew taut but she didn't say anything.

Mr Curshaw stared at Henry for a few moments then snorted. Then he turned his attention to Julie once more.

“And what do you do for a living?” he asked. “McDonald's? Waitressing perhaps?”

"I'm the Assistant Buyer at Ashton-Mole," she said, exaggerating her role slightly.

"Hmmm," he replied. "And your mother? I suppose she does have a job or is she still claiming benefit?"

"My mother is a pharmacist," said Julie, a touch of red appearing in her cheeks. "With Drummonds in the High Street."

"Ohh, Drummonds. I know of them. Don't go there myself."

Julie raised an eyebrow. "No," she said. "I don't imagine you do."

Mrs Curshaw came in with a tray of tea cups and a plate of biscuits. She put it on the table and looked enquiringly at Mr Curshaw.

"Pour the tea, Mabel," said Mr Curshaw. "You do drink tea, I suppose?" he said to Julie.

"Milk, no sugar," said Julie stiffly, then "Thank you," as Mrs Curshaw passed her a cup.

Mr Curshaw settled back in his chair with his tea. Mrs Curshaw silently offered biscuits around. Henry took one and Julie declined.

"Have a biscuit, Mabel" said Mr Curshaw firmly. Mrs Curshaw took a biscuit and sat there quietly with it in her hand.

The silence grew. Mr Curshaw fixed Henry with his eye. Henry was still staring at his feet.

"You've been behaving yourself, Henry?"

Henry jumped nervously and dropped his biscuit, which broke and scattered a few crumbs. Mrs Curshaw leapt up to get a dustpan and brush from the kitchen.

"Not now, Mabel, sit down," barked Mr Curshaw. Mrs Curshaw sat down.

“Henry mowed our lawn this morning,” said Julie.

“I daresay he made a mess of it,” said Mr Curshaw. “He makes a mess of everything. Can't even get a promotion, can you boy. Four years a junior clerk, can't even get off the bottom rung of the ladder.” He snorted derisively.

“Henry's going to be a trainee,” said Julie angrily. “HR are sorting it out next week.”

“Waste of time and effort. That boy'll fail. He always does. Isn't that right, Mabel.”

Mrs Curshaw started like a skittish pony and nearly spilt her tea.

“Hmmp,” said Mr Curshaw. “He's spineless that boy is. That's why I told him to go. Get out and get a life I told him. Get yourself some backbone. So what does he do? He takes up with two women. He'll get everything done for him. Never become a man now.” He shook his head sorrowfully.

Julie carefully placed her tea cup on the occasional table, her hand shaking with anger. She stood up.

“We're here to collect Henry's possessions,” she said, her voice like ice. “Come on, Henry, we'll do that then we'll go.”

She strode to the door and paused. “Come on, Henry”.

Henry looked up for the first time and glanced at his father then Julie then back at his father, who just stared at him. He slowly got to his feet and followed Julie upstairs.

At the top of the stairs she clearly heard Mr Curshaw's voice.

“Did you hear that little slut call him 'sweetie'? And the way she bosses him round? Ye gods, what did I ever do to deserve a son like that? And look at all that lipstick on the tea cup.”

And, very faintly, “Yes dear.”

Inside Henry's room Julie shut the door firmly and leaned against it, her eyes closed. She counted to ten silently then counted to ten again. And a third time for good measure.

"Right," she said brightly, opening her eyes. "Let's get everything packed and go."

"I thought you wanted to go through my clothes and chuck out what you didn't like," said Henry.

"We can do that later. Let's just grab everything and go. I feel uncomfortable here."

"Oh, take no notice of dad," said Henry. "He was trying to be nice. I think he liked you."

Julie stared at him. "Just pack," she said. "You need to get out of here and never come back."

Forty five minutes later all Henry's clothes, books and CDs were packed into the suitcase he'd brought and another he'd got from the attic. Mr and Mrs Curshaw were still in the lounge. Mr Curshaw came out when he heard them come down the stairs.

"So you're off then, Henry, eh?"

"Yes, dad," said Henry, staring at the carpet.

"I'll be honest," said Mr Curshaw, "I expected you to be begging to come home by now, but you've got yourself a cushy little number now with two women to wait on you hand and foot. I blame myself. I should have found you somewhere to live with a real man in the house. I don't expect you'll ever amount to much now. Be off with you, then."

"Yes dad," said Henry, holding a suitcase in one hand and a CD player in the other. "I'll just say goodbye to mum."

"Don't you go making her life any more miserable than it is," said Mr Curshaw.

Henry headed for the door. "Bye mum, I love you" he mouthed at Mrs Curshaw standing in the lounge doorway. She smiled sadly and half waved her hand. Mr Curshaw glowered at her.

Henry went down the path towards the car. Julie followed with the other suitcase but stopped on the doorstep and turned to face Mr Curshaw.

"You know," she said conversationally. "I thought my dad was bad enough when he ran out on us, but he was never an evil man like you. Goodbye Mr Curshaw."

She turned and marched down the path. The front door slammed behind her and the whole house fumed.

She and Henry loaded the car and drove away. As they were coming out the other side of the town centre, Henry broke the silence.

"I haven't failed at everything, you know," he said quietly. "I passed all my exams at school. Good grades too."

Julie burst into tears.

"What the hell happened?" cried Denise as they came in the door. "What have you done to her?"

"I'll tell you everything later, mum," said Julie. "It wasn't Henry, he didn't make me cry."

Denise took Julie in her arms, all the while looking at Henry, a dire warning on her face. "OK," she said. "Later, you can be sure of that."

"Can we leave Henry's bags in the lounge for now? Go through them later? I need to just sit and chill for a bit."

"No problem, Blossom." She stared suspiciously at Henry who, predictably, turned red.

"Ummm, I think, erm, I think I'll go to my room," said Henry, dimly sensing that they'd prefer he wasn't there.

"It was terrible, mum," said Julie when Henry was safely upstairs in his room. "Now I know why Henry's the way he is," and she told Denise everything that had happened.

"And he called me a slut, mum, just because I called Henry a sweetie. And his poor mum, she never said a word. She looked like she was scared for her life. How could he be so cruel? I thought everyone loved their kids. And Henry didn't dare say a word. And you should have seen his face when he dropped his biscuit. He was terrified. Oh god, it was so horrible. I thought it was going to be fun and that Henry's mum and dad would be sweet and kind like Henry but oh, mum, it was so horrible. And then in the car on the way back he just said 'I haven't failed at everything, I passed my exams at school' and I just had to cry it was so sad, so freaking sad."

Denise just sat there, her arms around Julie, not really knowing what to say.

"Probably wasn't a good idea to tell him he was evil to his face," she said. "He probably took it out on Henry's mother after you'd gone."

"I know," said Julie. "That's been bothering me too. But I had to say something. I was so ... angry."

"I know, Blossom, I know. I would have done too. I probably wouldn't have been as nice as you were."

Julie gave a half laugh. Denise thought for a while.

"You know, Blossom, his dad is probably like that to compensate for some big failures of his own. Can't face up to it so he only sees failure in everyone else to compensate."

"At least Henry's out of there now. He's got a chance of a life at last."

"Yes," said Denise. "You know what that means though, don't you?"

Julie looked at her questioningly.

"He's our problem now," said Denise. "God help us."

Chapter Seven

“Are you going out tomorrow night, Blossom?” asked Denise. “Only I’ve got someone coming round for dinner I want you to meet.”

Julie looked up from her phone. “Oh, who’s that?” She was lying on the couch with her feet up on the back.

“His name’s Allan. He’s a friend of mine.”

“Is it like a date?”

Instead of denying it Denise went faintly pink.

“Wooooooooo, mummy’s got a boyfriend!” sang Julie. The phone fell to the floor unnoticed and Julie sat bolt upright facing her mother.

“So will you be here or not?” said Denise.

“I’ll deffo be here. Wouldn’t miss this for anything,” smirked Julie. “I’ll cancel everything. So what’s he like, is he cute, what does he do, how long have you known him, why haven’t you mentioned him before, is he married, what should I wear, does he have any kids, are you serious about him, what are you wearing, is he going to be my new father, have you shagged him yet ...” Julie paused for breath and Denise held up her hand.

“Stop.” She gave Julie a look and Julie subsided, twitching with curiosity.

“His name’s Allan and he’s an accountant. I’ve known him for about four months to say hello to and a couple of weeks ago we had lunch together. Stop!” Julie had taken a deep breath ready to launch into another barrage of questions. She subsided again, fidgeting with excitement.

“He’s three or four years older than me and he’s a widower. He’s got a son your age who’s travelling in India and he’s back in a few weeks to start uni and a daughter who’s a couple of years older who’s already at uni. So he’s basically now alone. And no, I haven’t shagged him yet,

I'm a respectable middle aged woman."

"Oh muu-um. I've heard what you got up to when you were my age. Auntie Kate told me everything."

"Yes, well, you mustn't believe everything my sister tells you. She wasn't a Miss Goody Two Shoes either, you know."

"I know," grinned Julie. "She's told me how the two of you used to go hunting at weekends." A sudden thought hit her and she reached out and put a hand on her mother's arm.

"Are you lonely, mum?"

"It's been a bit quiet in the evenings when you're out, Blossom, but you've got your life to lead. And I haven't been out with anyone for, ohh, three years now, not since Zach."

Julie wrinkled her nose at memories of Zach.

"Do you like him, mum?"

"Yes I do, so be nice, OK? I'm always nice when you bring someone home so you can reciprocate."

"I'm always nice. And you weren't very nice to Boz."

"Boz was a drugged up biker, Blossom, no way was I letting you go to that week long festival with him, not with you being 15 and all. Let's not get into that again."

Julie laughed. She'd never been interested in Boz, she'd just wanted to get back at her mother over something and it had worked beautifully.

"Shall I wear my blue dress or the short black one or ..."

The conversation moved into what each would wear so as to look their respective best without clashing.

There was a sudden halt as Julie had another thought.

“Oh, what about Henry?”

“Allan knows we've got a lodger,” Denise said. “With a bit of prompting I'm sure Henry will go to his room after dinner. I'm sure he'll be fine.”

“Well if he doesn't just give me a sign when you want to be alone with him and I'll take him upstairs so he can show me his CDs or something.”

“That's very sweet of you, Blossom, but it'll be fine.”

Julie had seen Henry's CDs when she'd thrown away most of Henry's clothes after he'd brought them back from his parents. Pretty much all Henry had left now was a week's worth of underwear, a pair of jeans, a couple of t-shirts and his work clothes. Plus his seven books and five CDs of classic jazz. Not the sort of thing she'd listen to, except in an emergency.

When Allan arrived the following evening they took him into the lounge. Denise apologised for the state of the armchairs and explained she had some new ones on order and asked that Allan forgive the mess. Julie hadn't seen it so tidy for years but kept quiet as she was much more interested in watching Allan and how he interacted with her mother. Henry, as usual, sat in the other armchair and kept his own counsel.

When Denise said she had to go and attend to dinner, Julie leapt up and said she'd go and help. The two disappeared into the kitchen and closed the door.

“So, ah, Henry, what do you do?” asked Allan, as the silence began to stretch.

“I'm in the Accounts Department at Ashton-Mole, Mr Tollwyn,” said Henry, then paused as Julie's muffled shrieks of laughter penetrated the kitchen door.

“Ah yes, good, call me Allan,” said Allan nodding. “I'm an accountant myself. I have my own practice.”

Henry bounced his foot nervously.

“Umm, Allan, I wonder if I could ask your opinion on something?” said Henry.

“Certainly, for what it's worth,” said Allan.

“The thing is, I'm the junior account's clerk at Ashton-Mole and I've been doing that for four years. I had a word with the HR department about maybe getting some training in something and moving to another area but they've only got a vacancy in Sales and I don't think I'd be any good at selling.”

“You need a certain something to be able to sell well,” said Allan, “I've never had the skill.” He waited for Henry to get to the point.

“Well, they asked around the other departments and the Canteen Manager wants to take on a trainee cook. I've talked with Julie and Denise about it and they both think it's a good idea but my dad would say it's a backwards step, not progress, if you know what I mean. So do you think I should stay in Accounts?”

“Do you like accountancy?” asked Allan.

“Not really,” said Henry hesitantly. “But that doesn't really matter does it? I ought to try to make something of myself, shouldn't I?”

Allan had had similar career talks with both his own children.

“To be honest, Henry, accountancy is one of those fields which you either love or hate. I happen to love it but most people don't. How old are you?”

“I'm 24.”

“Look at it this way then. You've got another forty years or so before you retire. Do you really want to do something you don't like doing for the next forty years?”

Henry hadn't thought of it that way and shook his head.

“And if, after four years, you're still the junior clerk then you're probably not going to get to the more interesting stuff for quite a long time. Do you like cooking?”

“I don't know,” admitted Henry as another of Julie's laughs came through the door. “I've never cooked anything, but I do like eating.”

“Are you worried that cooking doesn't have the status that accounting does?”

Henry nodded.

“Well, everyone is going to need to eat no matter what happens but even a minor collapse in the economy means a lot of unemployed accountants fighting for jobs to make toast. By the way, you have to live your life, your father won't be living it for you. Which means you have to make decisions about what's right for you not what's right for what your father thinks. I would have liked both my kids to have taken up accountancy but the days of the son following in his father's trade are long gone.”

He thought for a moment.

“Can you think of anything good about your present job that would make it worth continuing with it? Great people to work with for instance?”

“Mr Cavendish the Junior Accountant hates me I think,” said Henry. “HR gave him a reprimand and he blames me for it.”

“Would you get a cut in pay?”

“No, I'd get a raise since the cooking job is a trainee position so the pay is about 50% more than a junior clerk position.”

“So let me summarise,” said Allan. “You're in a job you hate which is going nowhere, with low pay and the people you work with hate you too. Is that about right?”

“Umm, yes,” said Henry, mortified that Allan had summed up his life

so succinctly.

Allan stifled a laugh. "So why are you asking my opinion? It seems pretty obvious to me."

Julie opened the door and announced dinner was ready. They took their places and Denise dished up the prawn cocktail starter she'd made with her own sauce based on her mother's recipe.

"What were you two so busily talking about?" Denise asked casually, with a glance at Julie.

"Henry was asking my opinion about whether he should change jobs," said Allan.

"What did you tell him?"

"Let me put it this way," said Allan, leaning over towards Henry. "If you can learn to cook half as good as this," and he waved a spoonful of prawn cocktail in the air, "you'll be a damned sight more useful to society than I've ever been. Do it, Henry, do something useful."

It took Denise almost a full minute to realise what this meant about her culinary skills then she beamed.

"Can I have some more mum?" asked Julie who hadn't been listening as she'd discovered she loved prawn cocktail. "Why haven't we had this before? Are you trying to impress Allan? Can we have it again tomorrow?"

"It's far too late for that," said Allen. "I've been very impressed since the day we met."

This time it was Denise who went red, not Henry.

"Do you like music?" Julie asked Allan after she devoured the last scrapings of her prawn cocktail.

"I love music," he replied. "I played sax in a jazz band when I was your age. We weren't good enough to make it though so we split after

a couple of years. How about you?"

"Henry likes jazz too," said Julie. "He's got a Dizzie Lizzie CD upstairs."

"Dizzy Gillespie," said Henry.

Allan's puzzled look was replaced by comprehension. "Ahh yes he was a great trumpeter. I quite liked Nirvana and Soundgarden too but you're too young to remember them."

"Mum was into all that grunge stuff," said Julie. "I've seen her old photos. She's never had any sense of style, owwww," and she bent to rub her ankle then glared at her mother.

"That was quite delicious," said Allan, pretending not to notice.

"Oh shit," said Denise. "I forgot to open the wine you brought. Sorry. Henry, would you be a dear?"

"Yes, be a sweetie," said Julie.

"Is it in the fridge?" asked Henry, standing up.

He found a corkscrew and opened the wine and poured some for each of them, except himself.

"Go on try some," urged Julie.

Henry poured a thimble-full into his glass and sniffed it.

"You look like a connoisseur," said Allan. "Can you tell which region it's from by the smell?"

"Henry's probably never had wine before," said Denise. "I expect he's suspicious of it."

Henry didn't like the way the conversation was going so he poured in another thimble-full and drank it on one gulp. It tasted quite sour and he screwed up his face.

“So you brought us the cheap stuff then, Allan,” said Julie with a giggle.

“The man at the petrol station recommended it,” said Allan with a straight face. “It was nearly twice the price of the vinegar and he said it went very well with prawn crackers or even microwaved meat pies for those special occasions.”

“Shame you didn't bring any prawn crackers then although we've got some meat pies in the freezer. I could nuke some if you like,” said Julie. “Can I have another glass, this is pretty good for vinegar?”

“Don't listen to her Allan. This is an expensive wine. You can tell by the smoothness,” said Denise.

“Yes he is smooth, isn't he, mum,” Julie had a fit of the giggles and Denise glared at her.

“I have a sentimental weakness for my only child and I've indulged her as you can tell,” she told Allan. “She will grow up one day, the doctors tell me.”

“Yes,” said Allan, “and the day she does you'll regret it for the rest of your life.” He raised his glass. “I'd like to make a toast to a wonderful mother and her wonderful daughter.” Denise and Julie clinked glasses with him. “Oh, and err, their wonderful lodger.” Henry smiled.

Julie caught Denise's eye and winked. Denise raised an eyebrow at her.

“You really owe me one,” Julie said while Henry was in the bathroom the following morning.

“Why's that, Blossom?”

“I had to listen to those crappy jazz CDs all last night,” said Julie. “No wonder I'm frazzled this morning and my hair is a sight. When did Allan go?”

“It was after midnight,” said Denise. “Thank you” and gave Julie a kiss.

“Are we going to see him again?” asked Julie.

“I expect so,” said Denise. “After all, he's used to teenage daughters so you probably didn't put him off that much.”

“I was all sweetness,” protested Julie.

“I know you were, Blossom. You think you could get along with him?”

“He seemed a nice man,” said Julie. “You like him though that's what's important. Oh, here's Henry. See you tonight mum, love you.”

“Do you really like that jazz stuff?” said Julie when they were in the car.

“No, not really,” said Henry. “But my dad said it was the only music worth listening to. Although I did quite like Icona Pop. My cousin gave me their CD for Christmas when I was 16 or 17.”

“You're so damned hard to please, we've got to kill this switch, you're from the seventies and I'm a nineties bitch,” sang Julie loudly and slapped the dashboard on the last word.

“That was my favourite,” said Henry. “I love it.”

“How come you don't still have it?” said Julie.

“My dad broke it,” said Henry. “He gave me a Miles Davis CD instead. I played it for you last night.”

“Oh,” said Julie. “Are you going to take that job in the canteen?”

“Yes,” said Henry. “I've been thinking, you and your mum and Allan are right. I have to live for myself, not for my dad. I'd love to be able to cook like your mum did last night.”

“She normally doesn't bother but she was trying hard for Allan,” said Julie.

“How did she learn?”

“How would I know? Anyway, mothers can always cook. I'll probably magically be able to cook when I have kids too. They probably cover cooking at the pre-natal clinic.”

Henry didn't feel quite ready to pursue the idea of having children with Julie just yet, although he felt it was very promising that Julie had raised the question of children this early in their relationship. Anyway, they'd reached the Ashton-Mole car park.

Henry sent Christian in HR an email as soon as he got in and went to see him after the morning break.

“I'd like to take the trainee cook job,” he told Christian.

“Excellent,” said Christian. “I had another email about you from Mr Cavendish yesterday so I spoke to the Chief Accountant. He had no idea who you are so I doubt very much that you are the cheeky troublemaker Cavendish makes you out to be. Regardless, I think your days in the Accounts Office are numbered so it's best you leave there. Maybe you'll be able to poison his lunch. Let me just give Bryn a quick ring to see when you can start.”

“Would Monday suit you?” he said after a brief discussion with Bryn Thomas the Head Cook and Canteen Manager.

“Yes,” said Henry.

“Good,” said Christian. “I told Bryn you'd pop over this afternoon and he'll tell you what your hours will be, what to wear and so on. I'll get on to payroll and get your salary changed so you'll get that in your next pay. Umm, what else, what else?” He drummed his fingers on the desk.

“Oh yes, how could I forget? We need you to sign a new contract. Half a sec while I print off a standard traineeship contract.”

He typed busily on his computer for a few moments, occasionally glancing at a scrap of paper beside him.

“There you go. Now the basic employment conditions are the same as

your old one but this guarantees you whatever time off you need for studies and exams, subject to approval by Bryn, and there's a supplement with it giving the additional health and safety standards since you'll be in a hot environment and working with food. Just sign one copy and keep the other one."

Bryn was a genial man with no trace of the Welsh accent his name suggested.

"This is a new position," he told Henry. "We've never had a trainee before, we usually just hire people and hope they can cook." He laughed. "You'll need to get the right gear to wear so get over to Dine and Shine out on the bypass over the weekend. You'll need an apron, a chef's jacket, white trousers and cheap trainers or clogs and a trainee's hat. You don't get to wear the high toque hat until you're qualified. And get five sets minimum as it's a dirty job and you'll need to wear a clean set every morning. I've written that lot down here for you. Also a couple of books you'll find invaluable although you'll be getting a lot more when you start your courses. I'll get a place organised for you at the college in Bishopsford. Ummm, I'll start you at 9am all next week and you'll be with me but after that I'll start you at 5am so you can help with the breakfasts. Any questions?"

"Umm," said Henry.

"Right. Here's one for you and I want your answer first thing Monday morning. Find out what the difference between a 'chef' and a 'cook' is. Got it?"

"Yes, Mr Thomas," said Henry.

"Call me Bryn. We don't stand on formality here. There isn't time. Basic rule here is if you've got a problem call me immediately. Second basic rule is don't get upset if I swear at you. I don't mean anything by it but tensions can get very high when things go wrong and they go wrong every effing day. If it's not the cookers it's the suppliers. Get used to it because it's the same in every commercial kitchen. Right, see you Monday."

Henry watched him disappear with the speed with which he talked.

“Right,” he thought. “Chefs and cooks. What on earth have I let myself in for?”

On the way home he asked Julie.

“No idea,” she said. “Mum’ll know. She knows everything.”

“By the way, I can’t go clothes shopping on Saturday. I have to get some outfits for the canteen and some books. I don’t think I can afford any other clothes. And I won’t be needing suits anymore.”

“Balls,” said Julie. “You need some decent stuff either way, we just won’t get you any suits. You can’t go round in just an apron all the time, you need something more stylish. You’ve got a credit card, haven’t you? Anyway, you’ll be earning a lot more, specially when you’ve passed some exams.”

Henry had to admit he did have a credit card.

“By the way, I went into town at lunchtime and got you a present. I’ll give it to you when we get home. I know you don’t like to take your hands off the steering wheel when you’re driving.”

Sitting in the lounge Henry unwrapped Julie’s present and just stared at it, tears welling in his eyes. Holding it gently in his hands, he turned it over and ran his fingers over the surface. It was the *This Is ... Icona Pop* CD. He sat there and looked over at Julie.

“Thank you,” he said. “Thank you very much.”

Denise looked at Julie in puzzlement.

“I’ll tell you later,” hissed Julie out of the corner of her mouth. “Why don’t you put it on the stereo?” she said to Henry. “Let’s hear some decent music.”

Henry held the CD out to her and she took it and deftly slipped it into the CD player in the corner of the room. She turned the volume right up and started to bop around the room.

*I got this feeling on the summer day when you were gone
I crashed my car into the bridge, I watched, I let it burn*

Laughing she grabbed Henry's hand. "Dance with me Henry, come on dance with me!"

*I don't care, I love it, I don't care.**

* I Love It, Icona Pop, 2013 on "This Is ... Icona Pop" released by Ten, Big Beat and Atlantic Records

Chapter Eight

“The hat is simply to keep hair out of the food,” the Dine and Shine assistant said irritably. “It’s not a fashion accessory.”

“Everything is a fashion accessory if it looks good,” retorted Julie. “And none of these look good. Don’t you have any more?”

The assistant retreated into the back room in defeat and came back several minutes later, smelling like he’d just had a cigarette.

“No, you’ve seen everything we have.”

“OK,” said Julie dismissively. “Come on Henry, pay for the rest and we’ll find some hats some place else.”

Henry dutifully picked up the pile of jackets, aprons, and trousers and went to the checkout. He winced as the assistant rang up the total and processed his credit card.

“What do I do if we can’t find any hats somewhere else?” he asked Julie when they were back in the car.

“Don’t worry,” she said with a smile. “I’m sure we’ll find something decent. If that shit happens you can wear one of my scarves as a bandanna for a few days.”

Henry cheered up rapidly. There was something romantic about wearing one of Julie’s scarves into battle like a medieval knight with his lady’s token.

“And I really liked those double breasted jackets, the others were straight up and down but these are more tailored, show off your shoulders better. The trousers are sad but no one can see your bum anyway when you’ve got the jacket on. Let’s try GetIt in Dorset Street.”

“We’re looking for a white hat,” Julie said to the razor thin assistant in the fairly small menswear section.

“I have a very nice leather cap,” said the young man, obligingly

opening a drawer. "And this one in suede is quite popular."

"Oh no," said Julie. "It's for him," tipping her thumb at Henry, "and needs to be easily cleaned. He's a chef."

"Ahh," said the assistant. "We don't have any chef's hats but ...," he cast his eye around then leapt forward to pull a cardboard box out from under the counter, "... these arrived yesterday. A new line we're starting in the ladies' section but we haven't got them on display yet."

He opened the cardboard box and pulled out a white cap which he passed to Julie.

"They're made from bamboo. They're called baker's boy caps which is the closest we have to a chef's hat but they're machine washable."

Julie put it on Henry's head and stepped back. She leaned forward and tilted it rakishly over one eye.

"Perfect," she said. "We'll take two. No, make it three."

Henry's heart sank. These caps were three times the price of the others at Dine and Shine.

"I need some cheap trainers or clogs as well," he said, watching the assistant put three caps in a plastic bag and ring them up on the till.

"How cheap?" asked the assistant.

Henry looked around but Julie was nowhere in sight.

"Umm, very cheap." Henry estimated that his credit card must be fairly close to its limit by now.

"Best try Cheap N Tasteful in the Mall, then," said the assistant. "We don't really do cheap here."

Henry nodded and paid. He wandered over towards the ladies section looking for Julie, who was rapidly rifling through a rack of colourful blouses.

"I need some trainers too," said Henry, "and my books."

"Uh huh," said Julie, not listening. "What do you think of this?" She held a blouse against her body, one sleeve outstretched at arm's length.

"Ummm," said Henry, who thought it was beautiful.

"Yeah," said Julie. "So not me, right."

She carelessly hung the blouse on another rack and started rifling again, then moved on to a rack of dresses.

"Here, hold this," and she threw a dress over Henry's head.

"Ohhhhhh, look at this. Niiiccee," and another dress came in Henry's direction.

A few minutes later she headed over to the changing room with Henry in tow.

"How many?" asked the prison warder clone on changing room duty.

"Five," said Julie and was given a plastic card with a large 5 on it.

"Won't be a mo," she said to Henry, grabbing the armful of dresses, "hold this."

Henry stood there clutching his plastic bag of hats and Julie's shoulder bag as a succession of women of varying ages, but none over thirty or so, went in and out of the changing room door. Every now and then Julie reappeared in a different dress and posed in front of the mirrors, barefoot, asking Henry what he thought and frowning at her reflection as she twisted this way and that. She took no notice of his answers. Eventually she reappeared in her original dress and shoes and handed all five dresses and the plastic 5 to the prison warder clone.

"C'mon, let's go," she said to Henry briskly, "we haven't got all day," and marched off.

Just as they were about to leave the shop, Henry heard “Ohhhhhh look at these” and turned to see Julie looking at some ornate clip-like things.

She held a couple up to her hair then grabbed a third. “Won’t be a sec,” she said to Henry.

“What were those things you got?” Henry asked as they walked to the car fifteen minutes later.

“What things?” said Julie.

“Those clips-like things.”

“Barrettes,” she said. “They’re for clipping your hair in place. And these are scrunchies.” She reached in her plastic bag and pulled out a handful.

“What are they for?”

“Putting your hair in a pony tail.”

“This was going quite well,” Henry thought. Julie seemed quite happy to talk about the things she’d bought.

“And what were those things you bought at the chemist earlier?” he asked as they reached the car.

She looked at him and giggled. “Tampons.”

“What are they for?”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t know?”

“No, why?”

"I'll get mum to explain later, they're more, umm, biological," said Julie as she put on her seat belt.

They got back quite late for dinner as Julie had met some friends at the mall and Henry had had to buy trainers and his text books on his own before loitering over a cappuccino as they updated each other on everything that had happened, might have happened, would never happen or could yet still happen since they'd last met. Julie wolfed a couple of mouthfuls then disappeared to the bathroom to get ready for her evening.

"Looks like you've been shopping," said Allan.

"I had to get clothes for work for Monday," said Henry. "They cost a fortune."

"Is this for the canteen?" asked Allan.

"Yes, I took your advice."

"Then keep the receipts. You can claim work related clothing against tax."

Denise had been inspecting the clothes Henry had bought.

"Put on a jacket and show us what it's like," she said. "Ohh, very nice. I like the way the double breasted front can be done up either side."

"I would think that'll be for when they get stains on it," said Allan. "Just swap sides and hide the stain."

"Damned good idea," said Denise. "Why've you got so many?"

"I need a clean set every day," said Henry, "so I got a week's worth."

"Won't you be at college one day a week?" asked Allan.

"Yes but I'll still need to be in my cooking clothes," said Henry.

"All that stuff's going to wreck my washing machine," said Denise.

"It's only a cheap one."

"Why not take them to a laundry?" said Allan. "I take my work shirts to a laundry in the High Street. I drop them in on the way to work and pick them up on the way home the same day. They iron them too and they're pretty cheap. You could claim that against tax too. I do. And they've got commercial washing machines and chemicals so they'll get out all the food stains."

"Great idea," said Denise firmly. "You should do that too."

Henry asked Allan for the name and location of his laundry. He hoped they wouldn't be too expensive.

"So when are you going to cook us something fancy for dinner?" asked Denise.

"I don't know," said Henry. "I've never cooked anything in my life but I've got a couple of books." He pulled out *Larousse Gastronomique* and *Commercial Kitchen Management*.

"Jesus," said Allan as he flipped through the Larousse. "It's over 1500 pages of small print."

"Bryn said I don't need to memorise it," said Henry. "It's for looking things up, it's an encyclopedia."

"Well, if you want any help just ask," said Denise, "although you'll probably pass me pretty quickly."

"Oh that would be great," said Henry. "I don't really know where to start."

"OK, you can help me with lunch tomorrow. I'm doing a roast so I'll get you to do some simple things like making gravy and explain what's going on."

"Super," said Henry. "And Julie told me to ask you about tampons."

"Why would she do that?" said Denise in surprise.

“She bought some today and I asked what they were for. She said to ask you.”

Denise looked at Allan.

“I think I’ll just see if I can get in the bathroom” said Allan with a grin. “Leave you two to it. I already know more about tampons than I ever wanted to know.”

“Well, that was interesting” thought Henry to himself a little later. He was sitting in the new Almond coloured recliner that Denise had bought and that he and Denise had spent nearly an hour assembling the previous evening. Part way through Denise’s explanation he’d vaguely remembered that they’d talked about such things in Relationship and Sex Ed at school but it had made no sense to him at the time. Denise was a lot more down to earth and explicit than old Mrs Davenport who’d obviously been embarrassed by the subject. Especially when that Greek girl, Katarina?, said she was already using them so could she be excused class. He also felt relieved. He’d been a little afraid that just thinking about Julie might have got her pregnant but since she was buying tampons she clearly wasn’t, even though she’d been talking about having children. Like many before him, Henry was realising that girls are mysterious and yet fascinating creatures.

Allan and Denise had gone out and Henry wouldn’t be driving Julie to the night club for some considerable time yet since she was still firmly entrenched in the bathroom. Icona Pop were playing quietly on the stereo.

“Might as well start at the beginning,” he thought, “there’s no time like the present.”

He picked up Larousse and leafed through the list of contributors to the first page.

ABAISSÉ A term used in French cookery for a sheet of rolled out pastry.

“That seems easy enough. I wonder how you make pastry?”

Henry was up to ACRA (a savoury fritter made by mixing a spiced

purée of vegetables or fish with a fritter batter) and was studying intently the recipe for salt cod acra when Julie appeared in mid-calf jeans that seemed to be impossibly tight and a bright pink crop-top that left almost as little to the imagination as the jeans did.

“Ready to go?” asked Henry.

“You're a sweetie for giving me a lift,” said Julie. “How do I look?” She gave him a twirl.

“Awesome,” said Henry. He'd overheard a man say this while looking at a girl in the mall earlier that afternoon.

“Oooh, you charmer,” said Julie, clearly delighted. She gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Let's go.”

Henry had got back and was up to ADVOCAT (a liqueur made with beaten egg yolks, sugar and spirit) when Denise and Allan came home. It seemed as though they wanted to be alone so Henry wished them goodnight and went to the bathroom. He washed the side of his face Julie had not kissed and cleaned his teeth and put Larousse on his bedside table before turning out the light. The house felt strange without Julie in the room next door.

“Nice hat,” said Bryn when Henry, very self conscious in his brand new outfit, arrived in the canteen on Monday morning. “Shame it's the wrong one.”

“Julie got it for me,” said Henry.

Bryn studied it for a moment then smiled. “It doesn't really matter, and you've got to keep on the good side of your girlfriend,” he said. “It covers your hair which is the main thing, although the college will probably make you buy a proper one since they have a dress code. Worry about that when you start. Now, chefs and cooks, what's the difference?”

“Chefs are qualified and cooks aren't,” said Henry promptly.

“Spot on. Well done.” said Bryn.

Henry was impressed Denise had known. He must remember tell her she was right when he got home.

"I'm qualified so I'm a chef. It doesn't make any real difference as the quality of the cook or chef depends on the training on the kitchen not on some piece of paper but if there's any liability trouble, like someone gets food poisoning, the insurance companies try to get out of paying out if the person isn't qualified, and one of my jobs is to raise the standard of this place. Which is why you're here as an apprentice and not as a cook. I shouldn't tell you this either but if you're a chef you'll find it easier to get another job. It's more difficult to prove your skills without qualifications."

Henry nodded. Bryn sounded very impressive.

"You've got your first exam in four hours," said Bryn. "I won't let anyone do anything in here unless they've got their basic food handling certificate from the government. Not even operate the washers, and the college needs it as an entry requirement. It's easy as pie, you just read some stuff online which takes about three hours then there's a multiple choice exam at the end and we just print out the certificate when you're done. You've got to get every question right but you can retake it twice a day until you do so don't stress. You can do it in my office."

He sat Henry in front of his computer and gave him the url.

"Come and find me when you're done," he said.

Three and a half hours later Henry found him beside a large oven checking a tray of individual pies.

"How'd you go?" said Bryn.

"I passed," said Henry, handing him the printout.

"You bastard," said Bryn.

Panic and dismay sliced through Henry like a knife. Wasn't he ever going to get something right? Then he saw Bryn's grin.

"I got one wrong when I did it. Had to redo the whole fucking four hours. Good for you boy, good for you," and he slapped Henry on the shoulder. "Now look at these pies, see the colour? That's what a good, properly cooked pie looks like. If it's a lighter colour it's undercooked and if it's darker it's overcooked. Easy isn't it. What do you reckon you do if they're undercooked?"

"Umm, cook them some more?"

"You're a natural Henry, you'll go far." said Bryn. "What if they're overcooked?"

"I don't know."

"Excellent answer," said Bryn. "If you pretend to know something you don't know in a kitchen you can get people hurt what with all this heat and sharp knives and stuff. Depends what you're cooking but with overcooked pies best thing to do is smother them in tomato sauce and charge a little extra." He laughed uproariously. "Catch."

He tossed a baking hot pie at Henry.

"Feel it. Feel the texture and the consistency. That's what good pastry feels like. If it's cracked and crumbly you probably didn't use enough water in the pastry and if it's a bit soggy you probably used too much water or the filling's too wet. Easy to know at the end but not so easy when you're mixing it."

"Fucking good pies, Deb, good job," he roared across the kitchen in a loud voice. A plump middle aged woman waved back at him.

"Cooking's just one side of running a kitchen. Managing staff's another. Always put 'em right if they do something wrong and always give 'em praise when they do something right. Never leave it until later. Too much criticism makes 'em resentful and too much praise makes 'em lazy. Get the right balance and they'll work their arses off for you. And do it so's everyone else can hear so they know what to expect. Now take that pie and fuck off somewhere and eat it, I'm busy. Come back when the lunch rush is over."

Henry took the pie out into the seating area and saw Julie and Kasey at a table, engrossed in their phones. He went over.

“Can I join you?”

Julie smiled at him and Kasey ignored him.

“How's it going?” asked Julie. “Did you make that pie? Looks yummy.”

“Oh no,” said Henry. “I haven't started making anything yet. But I passed my first exam.”

He proudly showed her the food handling certificate.

“Cool, 100% awesome, look Kasey.”

“Yeah awesome,” said Kasey without looking.

“She's a bitch,” said Julie, “take no notice of her” and went back to her phone.

“Who was that blonde you were with just now?” asked Bryn when the lunch rush was over.

“Julie,” said Henry. “She's in Purchasing.”

“The Julie who got your hat? Your girlfriend?”

“She helped me get my uniforms. I live with her. She didn't think the apprentice chef's hats were stylish enough.”

“You just live with her,” muttered Bryn. “You're a bleeding dark horse all right. Talk about style. Right, I'm taking you off breakfasts next week seeing as how I don't expect you'll ever be able to get here for 5am living with a bird like that. I'll get you in at 8.45 and you can help with the main meals. Breakfasts are for tossers anyway. Bacon, eggs and toast. Too easy by half. Come into my office.”

Henry followed Bryn into his cramped, disarrayed office.

“Now,” said Bryn. “Where's that paperwork, eh?”

He rummaged around among a mess of invoices, rosters and other pieces of paper then pulled out a couple of pages of printout.

“Here we are. I've got you on the Cert Three in Catering at Bishopsford College. It's two years, one day a week and mostly theory as they'll expect you to get your practical work done here. There's all the details. Where's the other one?”

He rummaged some more and found another piece of paper with grease marks on it and handed them all to Henry.

“This is a list of the units they cover. The ones marked with a C are core units that you have to take and you can choose fifteen others. The ones I've marked with an asterisk are the ones I want you to take as they relate to what we do here. That'll leave you with six others to choose depending on what you want to specialise in, like pastry or sauté. The only real problem with that is you'll need to do your practical work at home as we can't tie up the kitchen here for stuff we don't do. Like desserts, we only do really simple desserts here like apple pie and ice cream. Not much call round here for crème à la cassonade or mille-feuilles.”

He laughed and jumped to his feet.

“Now,” he said. “I'll show you round the kitchen and explain what everything is. After that you're going to spend the rest of this week doing the most important job in the kitchen. What do you reckon that is?”

Henry thought for a few moments.

“Washing up?” he asked tentatively.

Bryn's laugh made a lopsided filing cabinet rattle.

“Close,” he said. “You're good. Cleaning and polishing are the most important. Can't cook a fucking thing if you're shut down for breaching health standards. Hot water, rags and disinfectant are the chef's most important tools. Don't tell Julie that, though, or she'll make you do it at home too.”

He laughed all the way to the cool room where he found a small pile of raw chicken intestines and started to swear in language Henry had never heard before.

Chapter Nine

"Jamie'll be back soon," announced Julie looking up from her phone. "That's so awesome!"

"So soon? Has it been six months already?" asked Denise. "I hope his leave doesn't interfere with your course, it starts in two weeks."

"The newsletter doesn't say when, just that the commandos are rotating so it'll be in the next month." She started texting furiously.

"Who's Jamie?" asked Allan.

"Julie's boyfriend," replied Diane. "He's in the Royal Marines and the commando units rotate every six months, one on active service, one on standby and the other three on general duties. Jamie's unit is on active service at the moment so he'll be going onto general duties. He's in the Gulf right now."

"I was wondering why Julie didn't have a boyfriend. That explains it. Is it serious?"

"Yes," said Julie without looking up from her phone. "That's why I don't date guys, just dance with them. I'm going to my room."

She dashed up the stairs and slammed her door shut. Henry was doing some studying in his room next door.

"What's he like?" asked Allan.

"He's a really nice guy, quiet and polite. He's 23 and a sergeant and very responsible. Julie's been seeing him for a couple of years now and he really looks after her. When she's out with him I never have to worry. He took out some Hells Angels last year, all on his own. Julie said there were twenty of them causing trouble at a pub and Jamie took them all on and won but Jamie said there were only four and they were quite docile. He said he just told them to go and they did." Denise snorted. "As if. He said there's no such thing as good or bad soldiers, just trained and untrained. He was trained and they weren't so there wasn't a problem."

“Yes, I've heard some things about the marines. I don't think they're the type to doubt their own abilities. Why would it interfere with her course?”

“When Jamie's on leave she takes time off work to be with him until he goes back,” said Denise. “Normally it isn't a problem because her boss knows that the Royal Navy won't change their plans to fit in with him and that if he tried to stop Julie taking time off she'd just walk out anyway. But I don't know if the college will be so understanding.”

“I'm sure they will, after all they need the fee-paying students more than ever in the current economic climate.”

Denise's face clouded. “I'm sure you're right. But it's going to cause some problems though.”

“Why's that?”

“I rather think Henry's got a crush on Julie. And he doesn't know about Jamie. You've seen how he follows her around and does everything she tells him to do. This could really upset him. Especially if he thinks Julie's interested in him and I rather think he doesn't know enough about girls to have any defences. Come on, you were there when he asked me about tampons, at 24, I ask you!”

“He's a nice enough lad I admit but why's it your problem? He's just a lodger. And if anyone's going to break his heart, Julie will probably be nicer about it than most,” said Allan.

Denise sighed. “I don't think Julie's noticed. I doubt it would occur to her that he might have a crush on her. I'm pretty sure she just expects every man to do what she wants and that's the way life is.”

Allan laughed, his own daughter was similar in that respect although at nearly 22 she was beginning to learn to be more respectful of other people's feelings.

“He's had a hard upbringing which is why he's the way he is. Julie has undoubtedly broken several hearts already and is guaranteed to break quite a few more but most men are well equipped to handle that.

Henry has no defences whatsoever.”

Denise went on to tell Allan about Julie's visit to Henry's parent's house to collect his belongings and how Henry had cried when Julie had bought him the Icona Pop CD to replace the one his father had destroyed.

Allan sat there in silence, staring at the blank TV in the corner, re-evaluating Henry in the light of this new information. Things were now making sense. A while after she'd finished, he stirred.

“Last year I was in the car park behind the mall, going back to my car and I saw a man shouting at a little girl,” he said quietly. “She was maybe three or four years old and he was in a terrible temper. I guess she'd done something to annoy him, like all kids do sooner or later. But he shouted and raged at her and she just stood there sobbing in fear and anguish and clinging on to her teddy for dear life then the man just snatched the teddy away and threw it as far as he could and shouted that she'd never have another teddy again. The poor little shit just howled and wailed and tried to run after the teddy but he wouldn't let her. How on earth he expected that little girl to have any idea what he was going on about I've no idea. All she understood was daddy was angry and her teddy was gone. Her world was shattered. I'm ashamed to say I did nothing about it. I didn't step in and calm the man or get the teddy back or try to explain that the little girl hadn't got a clue what was going on.”

Denise watched his face, her heart going out to him.

“But I didn't. I walked on by, pretending not to have seen or heard anything. I was disgusted with myself later. Absolutely disgusted.”

He looked up and saw Denise watching him.

“I'm told that psychological abuse is far worse than physical abuse,” he said. “The mental scars can last forever and can easily wreck lives. You're a wonderful person for trying to help Henry. You're a better person than I am. How can I help?”

“Henry's not your problem,” said Denise. “He's mine. I'll think of

something.”

“Yes,” said Allan. “I see how you think Henry’s your problem now, but I’m getting very involved with you and I want your problems to my problems.”

He reached over to Denise and she took his hand with a caring smile. Their conversation moved away from Henry and on to more intimate matters.

They didn’t return to the subject of Henry until after Denise had re-applied her lipstick which had got rather smudged. She used her thumb to remove some traces from the corner of Allan’s mouth.

“If I’m right, when Jamie turns up Henry could get very upset. Imagine how upset you’d feel if someone you thought cared for you turned out to have a boyfriend.”

“Yes, I’ll be very upset when your boyfriend turns up,” said Allan.

Denise gave a wry grin. “Yeah, chance would be fine thing. You’re stuck with me, I’m afraid.”

“Glad to hear it,” said Allan. “Can I have that in writing?”

Denise slapped his roving hand away. “Stop it. Your chance will come later. We’re talking about Henry now.”

Allan sighed and sank back into the couch. “OK. What’s your plan?”

“I haven’t got one. I was hoping you’d have one.”

“Bugger. Maybe we should just lock Henry and Jamie in a room and let them sort it out for themselves. Let the best man win Julie.”

Denise looked at him contemptuously and Allan winced.

“OK”, he said, “I’m guessing Henry would have less chance of survival than a snowflake in hell.”

He thought for a few moments.

“How likely is Julie to tell him herself?”

“Pretty unlikely I'd say. She's fairly knowledgeable about guys and has probably already realised that if she tells him she'll lose her taxi driver and general fetchit. She'll probably never tell him unless he does something she can't avoid like propose to her or something. She can be a bit calculating like that.”

Allan was about to comment that most women seemed to be like that but decided against it. It was probably a basic survival thing in a man's world. And besides, annoying Denise was definitely not on his agenda.

“Although I think she quite likes him,” continued Denise. “She's fairly protective towards him anyway. She didn't need to go with him to his parents or to get his uniforms and I know she wouldn't want to hurt him.”

“So what you're saying is that we have until the man turns up on the doorstep?” asked Allan.

“Yes, it's just that we don't know when that will be. It's a security thing, they don't want individual marines targeted so they don't broadcast precise information like dates so he'll just turn up one day without warning. He leaves his mobile phone with Julie when he's away so he can't be tracked.”

They both sat thinking.

“I suppose one of us will have to talk to Henry,” said Denise after a minute or two.

“Well, thinking logically, we are making one big assumption that we could be wrong about.”

“What's that?”

“That Henry has feelings for Julie.”

“Oh piffle, you've seen him following her around like a little puppy. He doesn't act like that with me and I'm the one that gave him a place to live.”

“True.” Allan relapsed into silence. “But I think we need to know how far he is thinking before we can really do much. Like is he just hoping for a kind word or is he planning their wedding already?”

“Oh god,” said Denise. “He just might be, he's that clueless. I'm pretty sure he didn't have much to do with girls at school and has had nothing to do with them since. How do we find out?”

“Good question. Let's think about it while I make some coffee.”

“I don't suppose Julie could ...” he started when he came back.

“Forget it,” said Denise. “Julie's head is full of Jamie coming back at the moment. She'd be like hitting Henry with a sledgehammer. I think you need to have a talk with him.”

“Me?” said Allan in dismay. “Why me?”

“A man to man talk about women. He respects you. Probably more than he would me. After all, I'm Julie's mother so he might think I'm making things up to protect her. And you can tell him about the birds and the bees as well. I'm pretty sure he has no idea what sex is or where babies come from.”

“Hey, you're a pharmacist. You talk to men all the time about erectile dysfunction and STDs and genital warts. You're used to that sort of thing. I only ever talk to people about their tax returns.”

“But you've got a son, I haven't. Surely you've talked to him about life and sex.”

“Well, yes, but there's a world of difference between a father-son talk and a landlady's boyfriend – lodger talk.”

“You did say you wanted to help,” said Denise.

“Yes but I only said it to impress you. I didn't really think you'd take me up on it,” said Allan with a grin. “OK, I'll talk to him. God knows what I'll say but I'll do it. On one condition.”

“What's that?”

“That you're around when I do. You don't have to be in the room, in fact I'd rather you weren't, but he may need a substitute mother when I'm done.”

“OK, sounds sensible. When?”

“Now? Get it over with?” asked Allan.

“No, I'm really not up to it tonight. Be better if Julie was out too. Just imagine if she came down and interrupted.”

“Oh god. A nightmare. You realise I won't be able to sleep now. Unless you can think of something to help me sleep.” Allan's hand slid onto Denise's leg.

“Not yet,” she said, “and not with Julie and Henry in the house,” but she didn't make him move his hand, so he didn't, at least not away from her leg.

“OK Friday or Saturday then. She always goes out then yes? Even with Jamie due back?”

“I would think so. I'll ask her tomorrow.”

The following Friday, Denise and Allan watched TV until Henry came back from taking Julie to a nightclub. As he came in and headed for the stairs to go to his room, Allan cleared his throat.

“Why don't you join us?” he said. “We never seem to chat anymore.”

“I was going to go study in my room,” said Henry.

“Oh do come and join us, it'll be fun,” said Denise, with a bright smile.

“OK,” said Henry and came in and sat in his usual armchair.

“I’ll make some coffee,” said Denise. “Would you like some?”

“I’ll make it,” said Henry, jumping up.

“No, no, you sit down. I’ll do it.” Henry sat down and Denise disappeared.

“That was a very nice meal you did tonight,” said Allan.

“Thank you. Denise has been teaching me some of the basics and I’ve been trying out a few simple recipes. And Bryn at work is really good. He swears a lot when I muck things up but he explains where I went wrong and shows me how to do it properly. Not like in Accounts.”

“So you’re enjoying cooking then?”

“Oh yes,” said Henry enthusiastically. “It’s really good when something I’ve made comes out right. And,” he added shyly, “sometimes people say nice things about what I’ve cooked for them.”

“Are you looking forward to starting your course?” asked Allan. “Where the hell has Denise got to?” he wondered.

Henry’s eyes dropped to the floor. “Not really,” he said sadly.

“How come?” asked Allan, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees.

“Umm, well, mmm” said Henry. “I, umm, always got everything wrong at school. They always scared me,” he admitted. “I’m worried that college will be the same.”

“Oh I guarantee it won’t be,” said Allan, appreciating Henry’s predicament now he had better understanding of his past. “College is for adults and you’ll be treated like an adult. They’ll be like Bryn, only without the swearing.” He mentally crossed his fingers and hoped that would be true.

Denise came in with two coffees. "I've got some things to do in the laundry. I'll join you in a bit."

"Can I help?" said Henry leaping up.

"No, no, you stay and talk to Allan."

"Well it's getting a little late and I ought to get to bed soon."

"Talk to Allan, Henry" said Denise, a touch of panic making her voice firmer than she'd intended.

Henry collapsed into his armchair. The faint aura of a hunted animal surrounded him. Denise disappeared quickly.

"I, mmm, wanted to have a little chat with you," said Allan, stirring his coffee rapidly even though he didn't take sugar. "Man to man."

Henry's aura grew a little stronger. He'd had "little chats" many times in the past and not one of them had ever been fun. He shrank slightly in the chair.

"Umm, Julie's a lovely girl, isn't she?"

Henry nodded.

"Mmm, do you like her?"

Henry nodded.

"Does she like you?"

Henry didn't react. Allan sighed silently to himself. "This is going to be harder than I expected," he thought.

"Would you like her to like you?"

Henry nodded.

"Umm, would you like her to really like you?"

“What do you mean?” asked Henry.

“Never mind,” said Allan, realising it probably sounded like he was trying to pimp Julie, although Henry almost certainly wouldn't know what that meant.

He stopped stirring his coffee.

“Ummm, have you thought about Julie long term?”

“Now I sound like a slaver rather than a pimp,” thought Allan.

Henry nodded cautiously.

“So you've thought about being in a relationship with Julie? Say, permanently?”

Henry half nodded. He didn't quite know what Allan meant.

Allan could see that Henry was confused.

“Have you thought about being in a relationship with anyone other than Julie?”

“No,” blurted Henry. “Julie's perfect.”

“Ahh,” said Allan. “Well, at least I now know what his thoughts about her are,” he thought grimly.

“Well, no one is perfect,” he said. “Even Julie has her faults.”

He stopped. It was obvious this line wouldn't work.

“Have you told Julie what you think of her?” he tried.

Henry shook his head.

“Why not?”

“She'll probably laugh at me,” mumbled Henry. “Or tell me I'm

stupid.”

“So you're waiting for her to make the first move?”

“I don't understand.”

“Umm, you're waiting for her to tell you she likes you before you tell her you like her?” said Allen, hoping he'd said that right.

“I guess so,” said Henry. “Can I go now?” He looked hopefully towards the door.

“No, not yet” said Allan. He noticed a dark shadow beneath the bottom edge of the door and realised Denise was standing behind it, listening. He was certain she wouldn't be impressed with his performance.

Allan decided to try a different approach,

“Do you, mmm, know the difference between friends and lovers?” he asked Henry.

“I think so,” said Henry. “You make babies with lovers, don't you?”

“That's right,” Allan breathed a small sigh of relief. This was a positive step at least.

“So you know that friends like each other but lovers are special? They're more important than friends? They mean more?”

“I guess so.”

Allan took a deep breath. The moment of truth had arrived.

“Julie is your friend. But she'll never be your special friend,” he said gently.

Henry looked puzzled.

“But she's talked about children,” he said, plaintively.

“Oh for god's sake!” thought Allan, “What has the damned girl been saying?”

“She's talked about having babies with you?” He tried to keep his voice normal.

“Umm,” Henry thought back, “we were in my car and talking about cooking and she said she'd probably learn about cooking when she became a mother.”

“But she didn't say anything about you being the father of her children?”

“I guess not,” muttered Henry. “But she was with me in my car.”

“Henry, listen to me. Girls grow up knowing they're going to be mothers one day. It's in the backs of their minds all the time but when they say something about that it doesn't mean they want the person they're talking to to be the father. They're just talking. When a girl wants a man to father her children she's very careful about who she chooses. She needs to fall in love with someone first. Someone very special.”

Henry stared at his feet. He had an idea of what was coming and wished he was somewhere else. Like a desert island.

“Henry, I need you to understand something. Julie has a boyfriend. Someone special. You are her friend and you'll always be her friend but you aren't the one who's special to her.”

“Where is he then? Why isn't he around?”

“He's in the navy. He's with the Royal Marines and he's stationed overseas at the moment. He's coming back very soon.”

“Julie loves him?”

“Yes, very much. She likes you but she loves Jamie.”

Henry stared at the floor, his hands hanging limply between his legs,

his face a mask of misery.

“You didn't handle that very well,” said Denise after Henry had hurried up the stairs to his room. “Mind you, you did it at least as well as anyone else and better than I could have. It was a dreadful situation. I suspected he had a thing for Julie and I was right, unfortunately. Thank you,” and she gave Allan a kiss.

“I wonder how Henry's feeling? Should I go and check on him?” she added.

“No,” said Allan heavily. “Let him lick his wounds in peace. He's got to come to terms with it in his own way. You just need to be there to help him when he needs it.”

“What if he needs it now?”

“He doesn't. It's too soon, too sudden. He needs time to process it.”

Denise stared worriedly up the stairs. “He won't do anything stupid, will he?”

“Oh god, no,” said Allan. “He's a tough little sod. Has to be to have survived this long. I just hope he respects me as much as you think he does. After all, I've basically guaranteed he'll find someone better than Julie and since she's perfect in his eyes that's a pretty hard guarantee to meet.”

“She isn't perfect, she can be a nasty little bitch when she's in the mood.”

Allan laughed, glad it was all over. “Try telling him that. Anyway it's time I went home. It's been a very stressful evening for me.”

Denise's good night kiss lingered a delightfully long time.

Henry lay on his bed, disjointed thoughts swirling through his mind. It's happening again. Why did Julie take me to meet her friends at the coffee shop? Surely that means she likes me. But I've got it all wrong yet again. I'm useless like dad said. But she wouldn't let me have any

old hat, it had to be a good hat, but she's got a boyfriend. Dad always said I was stupid. And she took me clubbing. And drove me home when I was so stupid to drink too much to drive. She stood up to dad though. But she's a slut like dad said. No Julie's not a slut, she's perfect. But Allan said she isn't perfect. And she doesn't like me. Dad was right, I am worthless. I'm not good enough for her. Maybe I should kill myself, that would solve everything. No, it would upset Denise. And Allan's right. But she kissed me so she must like me. So maybe Allen is wrong. Round and round and round.

He woke with a start. Julie was back and coming up the stairs. He leapt out of bed on an impulse and opened the door.

"Hello Julie," said Henry, his eyes red and puffy.

"Hi sweetie," whispered Julie, "don't wake mum."

"I'm not asleep," thought Denise, in her room with the door partially open so she could hear if anything unusual happened in the night.

"Sorry," whispered Henry. "Umm, do you have a boyfriend" he blurted in a whisper loud enough to carry downstairs.

Julie looked at Henry for a few moments then dropped her eyes.

"Yes," she admitted. "Jamie, he'll be back soon."

"Oh," said Henry. He stood there not knowing what to do. "Right then. Goodnight," and he closed the door.

"Nice one, Blossom" thought Denise. "You could have been just a little tactful."

Back in bed Henry lay there, listening to the sounds of Julie in her room. The swirling started up again. Why didn't she tell me before? Why didn't I see it myself? I'm so stupid. Dad's right. Allan's right too. How can everyone be right except me? I'm so useless.

Swirling round and round until he went to sleep from sheer mental exhaustion.

Chapter Ten

"Where's Henry?" asked Julie when she eventually got up on Saturday afternoon.

"In his room," said Denise.

"That's not like him." She yawned and reached for her phone.

"He had some bad news last night and I think he's a little upset."

"What's happened? His evil dad died?" Julie laughed.

"Nothing for you to worry about, Blossom. We'll just let him sort himself out and be there when he needs us."

"You're serious? I thought you were joking. Oh my god, what's happened?"

Julie went wide-eyed and put her hand to her mouth.

"Oh god. It's about Jamie isn't it?" said Julie. "Isn't it. He came out of his room when I got home this morning and asked me if I had a boyfriend and he looked at me all funny. That's what this is about, isn't it."

"I know, I heard." Denise had barely slept the night before and had left her door open all night so she'd hear if anything happened.

"Tell me. Is it about Jamie?" insisted Julie.

Denise sighed. Julie was a very bright girl and once she had her mind locked and loaded it invariably hit its target, like one of Jamie's assault rifles. Julie tended to be armour piercing too.

"OK. Yes, Henry's got it into his head that you liked him, mmm, not just as a friend. And with Jamie coming back we thought it best to break it to him gently rather than him finding out when Jamie walks in the door. That wouldn't be fair to either of them. You really should have told him long ago."

“Hey, it's not my fault.” Julie got defensive. “I've never done anything to make him think he's my boyfriend.”

Denise eyed Julie. Her daughter was pretty good at getting people to do things for her and didn't always realise how misleading she could be. Especially when she didn't have Jamie in ready view.

“Well, this isn't the time for a fight,” thought Denise to herself. “It won't do anyone any good.”

“No, possibly not,” she said to Julie. “It's just that Henry is very inexperienced with girls and doesn't know how to read the signals. You've probably said or done something that he's misunderstood. Like calling him 'sweetie' all the time. He doesn't realise that you're being a little sarcastic. I think he thinks you mean it.”

Julie sat for a while while her coffee cooled. She reached for her phone then put it down again.

“Is he really upset?”

“I don't know. He's learnt to hide his feelings quite well so ...” Denise petered out.

“Have you seen him at all? I mean, like, he's not gone and ...” Julie petered out as well.

“No, I heard him in the bathroom maybe half an hour before you got up.”

“Jesus.” Julie picked up her phone and started to fiddle with it, passing it from one hand to the other. “Should we do something then?”

“What do you suggest?”

“No idea. Like you're the adult round here.”

“You're not a child, Julie, and you know it. Don't try that one on me.”

Julie flicked on her phone, stared at the screen for a few moments

then flicked it off again.

“So what shall we do?”

“As far as I can see, nothing.”

“Are you for real? Do nothing?”

“It's not like Henry's not used to this. You know what his father was like. You know what his life was like. He's survived it for 24 years so I'm sure he has some strategies for coping. Just give him time.”

“We can't just do nothing, mum.”

“OK. Go and talk to him then. Explain how you've been calling him sweetie for fun and how you've been getting him to drive you everywhere because you've just been using him.” Denise's temper flared momentarily.

“Oh mu-uum, I can't do that.”

Denise just looked at her.

“And I haven't been using him. I've been helping him too. Like with his clothes.”

“Yes, you're probably right, Blossom. But I didn't really realise something until last night. Henry's never had a kind word spoken to him, never been allowed to develop normally, never learnt about girls. Shit, he probably doesn't know much about boys either. So when someone comes along and is nice to him, buys him presents and let's him hang out with her, helps him”

Julie stared into space.

“I was only trying to be nice mum. I like Henry, he's a total geek but he is sweet. He doesn't hit on me like other guys do, you know what I mean? He's not a creepy guy trying to get in my knickers all the time. He's thoughtful and kind. And he is sweet. I wasn't really being sarcastic.”

"I know, Blossom. And I'm as guilty of using him as you are, like letting him do all the cooking for me now and helping with the housework and cutting the grass. He just so willing and helpful it's impossible not to if you know what I mean. He'll make some girl a wonderful husband." She looked speculatively at Julie.

"No way, mum, just, like, no way, OK? Anyway, Jamie wouldn't like it."

"So we do nothing, OK. Let him sort himself out."

"I guess." Julie picked up her phone again then put it down.

"Has he eaten anything?"

"Not as far as I know," said Denise.

Julie brooded.

"Who told him? You?"

"No, Allan did," said Denise.

"Allan? What's it to do with him? He's just some guy."

"And Henry is just some lodger. But we've made him our business. And Allan has made me his business and he wanted to help, get involved."

"Oooooooh," said Julie, Henry forgotten for the moment. "So it's getting that serious then? You and Allan?"

The conversation veered away from Henry.

Julie had to get a taxi to the nightclub that night although someone gave her a lift home. Someone always did. She paused as she was about to go into her room and instead pressed an ear against Henry's door. She couldn't hear a thing. She paused for a few moments then tentatively tapped gently on his door. Silence. She tapped again, louder. Silence.

Perhaps he was asleep. She opened her own door and went in and changed into her pyjamas. She was about to get into bed then changed her mind and pulled on her dressing gown. She tapped on Henry's door again and listened carefully. There was still silence. She gently opened the door and stuck her head inside.

"Are you asleep, Henry?" she whispered nervously.

There was a rustle of bedclothes then Henry's bedside light came on.

"No," he said gravely. "I'm not asleep."

"Can I come in?" Julie asked.

Henry sat up in bed. He looked terrible. His hair was a mess and he'd been crying. Not a chunky man at the best of times his face looked drawn and pale. He was still in the t-shirt he'd been wearing on Friday as well. It looked decidedly crumpled.

"I suppose so."

Julie went in and sat on the edge of Henry's bed. She took his hand.

"Mum's told me about, erm ..." she faltered.

"About how stupid I am?" said Henry. "I bet that gave you both a good laugh."

"Oh Henry, don't be like that. We're not laughing at you, we're worried about you. You know that, don't you?"

Henry didn't react.

"Listen, I'm really sorry if I've given you the wrong idea. You're my friend and I really like you but Jamie's ..., well I've been with Jamie for a long time and he's special to me. You're special to me too but in a different way."

"I thought you wanted children," blurted Henry.

Julie was taken aback but recovered quickly.

“Yes, I do want children. I want Jamie's children,” she said gently, willing Henry to cheer up.

“I thought you liked me,” whispered Henry.

“I do like you, Henry,” whispered Julie back. “When did you last eat something?”

“I don't remember” said Henry. “Umm, I think it was Friday's dinner.”

“Well, it's Sunday morning now. You must be very hungry. Why don't you come downstairs with me and we'll get you something to eat?”

“I don't want anything to eat.”

Julie had a brainwave. “Well I do, so why don't you come down and fix me something to eat? Then we can sit in the lounge and talk comfortably. Wouldn't you like that? I know I would.”

Henry lay there quietly. “OK,” he said after a while and got out of bed. He was still in his jeans and socks as well. He followed Julie onto the landing.

“I just need a pee as well, and a wash,” he said, “before I handle any food.”

“OK, sweetie” said Julie, without any sarcasm. “I'll be in the kitchen.”

As she passed the door to her mum's room a hand touched her arm and she nearly screamed.

“You're doing brilliantly, call me if you need me,” whispered Denise from the darkness.

“Jesus, you freaked me out,” whispered Julie back. “Don't ever do that again. Do you want a cuppa?”

The door closed quietly.

Henry made some bacon and egg sandwiches and got out a packet of chocolate biscuits. They sat side by side on the couch. Julie left the lounge door open so Denise could hear.

"I'm sorry," said Henry. "I know I'm stupid but you're so sweet and kind to me. All of you. Even Allan."

"Surely other people have been sweet and kind to you?" said Julie, worried about how many calories she was eating.

"No, usually they laugh at me. Or my dad would tell me how stupid and useless I am. Or give me a hiding so I'd learn my lesson."

"Your dad hit you?" said Julie, shocked.

"Not since I was a kid," said Henry, matter-of-factly. "After I left school he said I wasn't a kid anymore and I had to act like a man. After that he just used to shout at me. Would you like another sandwich?"

"Jesus, Henry," Julie was on the edge of tears. "Listen to me, OK. Listen."

She pulled Henry's chin so he was facing her.

"No one's ever going to hit you again, OK. I'll make sure they don't. And I won't let anyone shout at you."

Henry looked at her steadily. He'd washed his face and combed his hair although he hadn't shaved.

"I'm your friend, you understand? OK, there's been a little misunderstanding here but I'm your friend. And I won't let anyone hurt you, OK?"

"OK."

"I'm not the right person for you anyway. You need someone sweet and gentle. I'm not like that. I'm kinda loud and out of control," she laughed. "You've seen me clubbing and with me mates. You couldn't

live with someone like that.”

“I suppose you’re right,” said Henry, sadly.

“So what we need to do is find the right person for you. You’d like that wouldn’t you?”

“Allan said much the same thing.”

“What did he say?”

“I told him you were perfect and he said you weren’t.” Julie bridled a bit at that. “And he said someday I’d find someone who was perfect and then I’d know what love really is.”

“And I’ll help you find her,” said Julie, mentally running through her friends for a likely candidate and coming up blank.

“You remember when I started in the canteen and had that exam?” said Henry. He hadn’t really been listening to Julie.

“That one you got 100% for?” she said.

“Yes. Bryn called me a bastard for that.” Julie stiffened.

“I was really upset at the time but he was grinning at me and told me I’d done well to pass first time.” Julie relaxed.

“And then I showed you my certificate in the canteen and you showed it to Kasey but she didn’t bother to look at it. And you said she was a bitch, remember?”

Julie didn’t remember but nodded anyway. She was always calling Kasey a bitch. She hoped Henry didn’t know what Kasey called her. It certainly wasn’t ‘perfect’.

“And Kasey’s your best friend, isn’t she?”

“She’s a good friend,” said Julie, “I wouldn’t say she’s my best friend.”

"I don't understand," said Henry. "How can you call someone a bastard or a bitch and still like them? No one's ever called me names and liked me. I've been thinking about it in ..." he jerked his thumb towards the ceiling. "I just don't understand."

Julie stroked his hand.

"It's complicated sweetie. Sometimes people insult people to be nasty and sometimes people insult them to be nice. It's stupid really."

He looked at her questioningly.

"Bryn wasn't being nasty. He was proud of you and called you a bastard to pretend he was angry when he wasn't."

"Why would he do that?"

"Oh god," thought Julie. "How to I explain human relationships in twenty minutes?"

"Umm, I guess it all comes down to what people think of you, not what they say. If you know someone likes you then when they're rude you treat it differently to when someone you know doesn't like you is rude. You wouldn't be upset if I said you were a bastard, would you?"

"I'd cry if you said that," said Henry. "I so much want you to like me."

"Bad example," thought Julie.

"I do like you and if I call you a bastard it'll be because I like you. Does that make sense?"

"No," said Henry. "It makes no sense at all. Are you saying my dad liked me after all?"

"Oh god, now what have I done?" thought Julie. "I wish mum was here."

"I don't think your dad did like you," she said, "but I'm not sure. Maybe he did but for some reason couldn't express it and was nasty

instead, I don't know. But I need you to do something very important for me.”

“What's that?” asked Henry.

“I need you to forget your dad. I need you to stop judging other people by what he did to you. He was a very rare and nasty man and most people aren't like that. So I need you to forget him and learn to trust real people, normal people, like my mum and Allan.”

“How can I forget my dad?” said Henry. “He's my dad.”

“Yes, I know he's your dad but he was wrong. He was very wrong and he treated you very badly. Has Allan ever treated you the way your dad did?”

“No,” said Henry.

“Has Bryn? Has my mum? Have I?”

“No,” said Henry. “You've all been very nice to me. Although Bryn swears a lot.”

“Well there you go. Four out of five have been nice to you. Don't let that one nasty man stop you believing the rest of us like you and think you are very kind and clever.”

“What about Kasey?”

“Forget Kasey, she's a bitch.” Julie laughed. Henry didn't.

“That was a joke,” said Julie.

“I don't understand,” said Henry.

“Oh dear,” said Julie.

“So how did you leave it?” asked Denise. Julie had gone into her room after Henry had gone back to bed. “I could only hear parts of it and I didn't want to come downstairs in case I interrupted.”

“Henry agreed to try to forget his father and to talk to one of us if anyone upsets him in the future and we will try to sort out whether it's real or not.”

“Jesus,” said Denise. “Je-sus”.

She brooded for a minute.

“Well, he'll never forget his father, that's for sure. His influence will always be there in the background. Henry's basic personality has been set now, for better or for worse. And I suspect you've committed the rest of us for the rest of our lives. We need to find him someone.”

“I didn't know what else to do mum. I've no experience of this.”

“You did brilliantly, Blossom. Maybe you should go into counselling.”

Julie pulled a face. Denise laughed and gave her a hug.

“Well at least he's a nice enough lad. It's not like he's got an axe or anything. I'm sure there are plenty of women who'd be only too happy to look after him. Not everyone loves a bad boy. It's just a question of finding one. You won't find the kind of woman Henry needs in a nightclub.”

“Where would we find one, mum?”

“How would I know? I was a clubber myself, like you. I've no idea where the quiet ones hang out.”

“Where did you meet Allan? He's a quiet one, isn't he?”

“Yes he is. He came into the pharmacy and we just clicked. But I don't think Henry can hang around the pharmacy all the time just in case Miss Right comes along.”

“No, I guess not. Shit I'm knackered. I need to get some sleep.”

“Yes, go to bed Blossom. We're not going to sort Henry's problems out tonight. I don't know if we'll ever sort any of them out.”

“Did you hear the best bit, mum?” asked Julie as she headed to the door.

“What's that?”

“Henry's still going to cook for us.” Julie smiled. “And he's going to drive me around until I get my licence.”

Denise burst out laughing.

* * *

“I've only known you a few weeks and we haven't even slept together yet and already you've given me another baby son. That's very ... innovative of you.” said Allen the next day, after Denise explained what had happened.

“Well, that's modern pharmaceuticals for you,” said Denise. “We can bypass the boring bits now, like sex.”

“I have to say I'm quite old fashioned,” said Allan. “And I'm an accountant. I like the boring bits.”

Denise laughed.

“Well, you did say you wanted to be involved. And it looks like we've adopted Henry. Do you mind?”

“Oh no,” said Allan. “So long as you change his nappies not me.”

“Oh god, I am so over that,” said Denise. “He's 24. We've got the good side of bringing up a child without the bad side. At least he can drive himself to school. I wonder how Jamie will handle him?”

“Oh no, you don't,” said Allan quickly. “We're not going to try behavioural therapy on him too. If Henry's upset he just goes to bed. Jamie's liable to dismember us and supplement his field rations with our bodies. I know what these marine types are like.”

“Jamie'll like Henry because Julie likes Henry. She's got him wrapped

around her little finger.”

“Just like you have with me.”

Denise smirked at Allan.

“Yes, you come when I waggle my little finger,” she waggled her little finger, “well, come here then.”

“Dinner's ready,” called Henry from the kitchen. “Come and get it.”

“Damn that bloody boy,” said Henry from under Denise. “The first thing we need to teach him is timing. Don't kids just wreck your sex life?”

“No,” said Denise. “That's why we have your place.”

Chapter Eleven

The TV in the lounge was on but no one was watching it.

Henry sat in his armchair reading a poor quality photocopy of an article entitled “17 Exciting Ways To Serve Sweet Potato” and inspecting the cuts on his fingers. The most recent had a bright blue sticking plaster wrapped around it.

“Never trust a cook without scarred fingers,” Bryn had said, “they’re your badges of honour.”

Henry had spent the last three weeks peeling, slicing and dicing vegetables in the canteen and the first day of his course had involved a two hour session on sharpening knives and general knife technique. Since then he’d been practising with carrots and cucumbers and was building up a fair speed at slicing but needed to work on his accuracy. They’d reviewed knife technique and health and safety during the second day and Henry had to hand in his first assignment on that next week.

Julie was in her usual spot, her back on the couch seat and her feet on the couch’s back with her hair trailing over the floor and her phone in both hands. Her first day at college had consisted of a fairly tedious lecture on the history of global procurement, an equally tedious introduction to business statistics and happy chats with other students. All three had continued on her second day. By a happy coincidence Henry’s day at college each week was the same as hers so her transport was assured, although being on a Diploma course she had three years ahead of her unlike Henry’s two.

Denise had been sitting squeezed into the remaining space on the couch and Allan was in the other armchair. They had been quietly talking to each other about their respective days. Denise had been groaning about an elderly customer who was forever getting confused over her prescriptions and Allan had half-heartedly explained the joys and tribulations of a new software update from the tax office.

Denise was in the kitchen making some tea when there was a business-like knock on the front door.

“Delighted to meet you, Allan,” he said.

They shook hands and while Jamie greeted Henry, Allan checked that his hand was still intact as it had felt as though it had been crushed to a bloody pulp. Colour was slowly returning to the areas that had gone white from the pressure.

“Sorry,” said Jamie as Henry yelped and waved his hand around. “Didn’t see you were injured. My bad. Why is the bandage blue?”

“Henry’s a trainee chef,” said Julie, irritably as Jamie was just out of arm’s reach. “I told you in my last email.”

“Haven’t checked my emails yet, you’ve got my phone.” replied Jamie, imperturbably. “Why’s the bandage blue?”

“That’s so if a bandage comes off it doesn’t turn up in someone’s lunch,” said Denise. “The blue stands out.”

“Ahh,” said Jamie, “Damned good thinking there.”

Henry had managed to avoid sucking his finger and was examining it to see if it had started bleeding again. It was stinging.

“So you’re a chef, Henry?”

Henry nodded, expecting this killing machine to be decidedly unimpressed by the culinary arts.

“Damned good skill that,” said Jamie. “Keep the lads well fed and they’re happy. Can’t fight effectively if you’re hungry. Good man.”

Henry cheered up a little.

“By the way, Henry,” butted in Denise, “Jamie eats three times what a normal person eats.”

Jamie looked at her quizzically.

“Henry does all our cooking,” Denise told him. “It’s good practice for

his course. And he needs to make sure you get enough to eat.”

“Ahh,” said Jamie to no one in particular, “I’m in the navy, they work us hard. Daresay Julie’s told you that. What do you do Allan?” He sat down again and the old couch groaned. Julie snuggled in tight again.

“Me? Oh, I’m a boring old accountant,” said Allan, feeling very intimidated by Jamie’s massive aura of self-confidence.

“Superb,” said Jamie. “Pay and food are damned essential pieces of kit.” He nodded and smiled genially at everyone.

“When did you get back?” asked Denise.

“Nine days ago,” said Jamie. “Couldn’t get leave until today. Have to get the men sorted first. Morale.”

“Ahh,” said Denise, as Julie squirmed inside Jamie’s armpit and grabbed his inner thigh. “How was the Gulf?”

“The Gulf? Who told you that?” demanded Jamie. “Active service destinations are classified information.”

“It was in the Brigade newsletter,” said Julie. “I get it every month by email.”

“Interesting,” said Jamie, pulling a small notepad out of his jacket pocket and making a note. He looked up and smiled to alleviate the sudden tension that had appeared in the room.

“Hot,” he said. “Very hot.”

That appeared to be all he was going to say on the subject of the Gulf.

“Oh lord, I was making some tea. Won’t be a moment,” said Denise and disappeared into the kitchen.

“How long are you back?” asked Julie.

“Ten days,” he replied. “On GD now so I’ll be round a lot more.”

“General duties,” he added to Allan, by way of explanation. “Been out of contact for six months, no leave, see.”

“I missed you, hon,” crooned Julie, hugging him tightly.

“I missed you too, gorgeous.” He bent down and kissed her on the forehead. She raised her face to his and kissed him on the lips.

Denise returned with a large pot of tea and six mugs on a tray. She poured and added milk and handed them round. Jamie swallowed his in one long gulp and put his mug on the tray and took the sixth mug. He noticed Henry watching him.

“Sorry, bad habit. Never know when you're going to be under fire so you learn to eat and drink quickly. Survival can depend on it,” he said. “Denise is used to my bad habits.”

He laboured to sip the second mugful like a civilian.

“So,” he continued. “What's your status here, Henry?”

“Henry is renting our spare room,” said Denise. “And Allan is my friend although he has his own house.”

“Superb,” said Jamie, having evidently reassured himself there were no immediate threats in the current theatre of operations. “So I'll be seeing a lot of you both then. Excellent.”

“Henry's in the room next to mine,” said Julie. “So you need to be careful not to wake him in the night.”

“Ahh,” said Jamie. “Noted.”

“Mum, Jamie's back for ten days,” said Julie.

“Oh how nice,” said Denise. “Will you be here all that time?”

“Of course he will, mum,” said Julie. “Where else would he go?”

“If you'll have me, Denise,” said Jamie, “although I will need to visit

my mum. Will you come with me, babe?" looking at Julie.

She smiled and nodded. "I'll phone work in the morning. I've already warned them I was going to be off but I didn't know exactly when or for how long."

Julie and Denise launched into a lengthy and convoluted update of what had been happening while Jamie was away and Jamie manfully displayed great interest. Henry and Allan felt decidedly left out and Henry surreptitiously read his photocopy on sweet potatoes until it was time for bed. He said goodnight but only Jamie and Allan acknowledged as Julie and Denise were wholly focused on Jamie. Allan amused himself by watching Jamie as he quite competently held his own in a three way conversation with two women.

When Henry came downstairs in the morning, Denise and Julie were in the kitchen.

"Made you some coffee," said Denise, pushing a mug over to him as he sat at the kitchen table.

"Are you feeling all right?" Henry asked Julie.

"Sure," she replied, "why?"

"Only I heard you moaning and crying out a lot in the night," said Henry. "I thought you were ill."

Denise spilt her coffee and swore and Julie started to go red.

"I was going to come in and see how you were but I heard Jamie's voice a couple of times so I guessed he was looking after you."

Denise mopped up her coffee with a dishcloth while desperately struggling not to laugh. Julie busied herself with her coffee and didn't look at Henry.

He took a sip of coffee.

"Did you hear that noise in the night?"

“What noise?” mumbled Julie.

“It was a kind of thumping noise that went on for a while. Happened two or three times. I couldn't make out what it was or where it was coming from.”

Denise left the kitchen with an arm around her stomach and a hand over her mouth, her shoulders shaking.

“No, sorry, I didn't hear a thing. Have you seen my phone? I can't find it anywhere. I wonder if it's in the lounge?” Julie jumped up quickly and ran into the lounge.

“Shittttttt! The screen's broken!” wailed Julie. She reappeared with her phone, fingers and thumbs blurring with activity.

“Still working though, thank god. Just need a new screen,” she muttered.

Jamie came in the back door.

“Morning Henry,” he said, giving Julie a kiss and stroking her hair. “Just been doing some callisthenics in the back garden.”

“I broke my phone,” said Julie plaintively.

“Don't worry, babe,” said Jamie. “We'll go into town at oh nine thirty hours and get it repaired or replaced.”

“How much bacon and eggs do you want Jamie?” asked Henry, going to the fridge.

“Half a dozen of each if I can, Henry and lots of toast,” said Jamie. “Good man that” he said to Julie. Denise appeared in the doorway having got over her laughing fit.

“Did you hear that noise in the night?” asked Henry innocently, piling the grill pan with bacon slices.

“What noise?” “Oh leave it alone, Henry” said Jamie and Julie

simultaneously.

“A regular kind of thumping noise,” said Henry. “Julie says she didn't hear it but I know she did because she cried out several times after a while then it stopped. Happened two or three times. I thought she was ill but she said she wasn't.”

“Ahh,” said Jamie, calmly. “That was me. Sorry if I woke you. Happens a lot when marines go on leave. Called 'bedroom manoeuvres’”.

“Is it part of survival training?” asked Henry as he cracked a dozen eggs into the largest frying pan Denise owned.

“Absolutely. Can't survive without it,” Jamie said seriously. “Be happening every night I expect. And sometimes during the day. Essential work, see. We'll try to keep the noise down.”

Julie had a major fit of giggles and Denise ran back into the lounge to laugh in peace.

“Going for a run in fifteen minutes,” said Jamie after polishing off his bacon and eggs. “Coming?”

“Deffo,” said Julie. “I'll just get changed.”

“When did you start running?” asked Henry.

“I always go with Jamie although I only run the first half mile,” Julie answered, pausing in the doorway. “Jamie carries me the rest of the way.” She disappeared upstairs.

“He usually does six miles when he's on leave,” said Denise proudly. “Don't you, Jamie.”

“Yes,” he replied. “Down to the park, full circuit round the lake then across to the High Street and back along Matheson Street. A little under six miles. Takes about an hour.”

“Why do you carry Julie?” asked Henry.

“Normally do thirty mile runs with eighty pounds of kit,” he explained. “Got to stay in shape on leave. Julie’s about a hundred ten pounds so the extra weight makes up for the shorter distance.”

“He’s got to carry his body armour, rifle, ammunition and rations,” said Denise. “It all weighs a lot.”

“It’s the batteries that are the killer,” said Jamie.

“What are the batteries for?” asked Denise curiously.

“Tactical computer, night vision and comms,” said Jamie. “Two complete sets of spares.”

Jamie and Julie visited Jamie’s mum on Sunday morning and returned mid afternoon to join Denise and Allen in the lounge. Henry was in the kitchen preparing dinner for eight to allow for Jamie’s appetite.

“Denise was telling me you were involved in a fracas with a group of bikers last year,” said Allan, “in a pub.”

Jamie looked at Julie. “At the Wheatsheaf,” she reminded him, “I told mum about it.”

“Ahh,” said Jamie. “I remember. Didn’t constitute a fracas though. More of a minor disagreement.”

“There were twenty of them,” said Julie.

“No, there were only three or four,” said Jamie. “They were a little boisterous and after appraising the situation I asked them to leave.”

“What were they doing?” asked Allan.

“They were making Julie nervous,” he said.

“There was a lot more than four,” said Julie, “and they were drunk and throwing chairs at each other and when the barman told them to leave they pushed him over the bar and swore a lot.”

"So what did you do?" asked Allan.

"I had a chat with them and they decided it was time to go," said Jamie, smiling disarmingly.

"Hmm," said Allan. "Weren't you nervous?"

"Of course not," said Jamie. "It's all about training and attitude."

"I've heard that," said Allan. "There's no such thing as good or bad, only trained and untrained."

"Correct," said Jamie. "And they could tell by my attitude that it was time to go."

"What do you mean?" asked Denise.

Jamie thought for a moment.

"Skills training is only good up to a point," he said. "You can still take out a trained enemy if he's psychologically unprepared. So mental training is equally important to skills training. It's about having a belief in your own abilities. Self doubt will destroy whatever other skills you have."

"Damn, Henry could use some of that," said Allan.

Jamie looked questioningly at him.

"Henry's had a difficult life," said Allan. "It's left him with little or no confidence in his own abilities."

"Got it," said Jamie. "We get a lot of recruits like that. I was like it too myself."

"Oh, I can't believe that," said Allan. "You seem so incredibly confident and secure with yourself."

"Training," said Jamie. "I was a skinny runt at school, lived on junk food and got bullied a lot. Ran away to join the navy when I was 16 to

get away from them. Don't know how I passed the physical. Transferred to the marines after three years. Plenty of good food and weight training built up my body and the marines built my head. Skills training and Psychological training. That's the key."

"Can you suggest anything to help Henry?"

"Tell him to join the navy. Always need good cooks."

"I think that's a bit drastic."

"Think of something else, hon," said Julie.

Jamie looked at her and smiled. "OK," he said. "We need a tactical plan."

He thought for a few seconds. "Right, primary objective, we need something simple and effective to promote self confidence. Secondary objective, we need something that will project that self confidence to the enemy."

He thought for a full minute. "Got it. The Haka."

Julie, Denise and Allan looked at him in puzzlement.

"It a Maori war dance," he explained. "Designed to boost the courage of the dancers and intimidate their enemy."

"Ohh," said Allan. "Isn't that what the New Zealand Rugby team do at the start of each game?"

"Correct," said Jamie. "And if it's good enough for the best rugby team in the world it's good enough for Henry."

"I have no idea what you are talking about," said Denise. "What's the haka?"

"I'll show you," said Jamie. "Bring Henry in."

Denise went to get Henry while Jamie rearranged the furniture.

“I need you all to sit on the couch,” he said. “This works best when you are directly facing the enemy at close range.”

Julie, Denise and Allan squeezed onto the couch and Henry sat on one arm.

Jamie removed his trainers and socks and peeled off his t-shirt. Two hundred and forty pounds of thick muscle glistened in the September sun coming in the the window. Julie licked her lips and Denise became very intent.

Jamie's face drew into a scowl and he dropped into a crouch. He went through a routine of stamping his feet on the floor, slapping his chest and thighs, making angry faces and chanting in a loud, aggressive voice, all the while coming closer and closer to the couch. When he was done there was silence.

“Ummm,” said Julie. “I, mmm, I've just remembered I need to show Jamie something in my room,” and she rushed out the door dragging Jamie behind her.

“That was, how can I put it, very intense, powerful,” said Denise, knowing exactly how Julie felt.

“I don't know about you,” said Allan thoughtfully, “but I found that incredibly intimidating. I've only ever seen it on TV from a high camera angle before a rugby match but to have it up close and personal, right in front of you, Jesus. Scary. What did you think Henry?”

He twisted to look at Henry who was pressed back against the wall, white faced.

“Are you OK?” said Allan. “Maybe you should get a drink of water.”

Henry fled to the safety of his kitchen.

“Do you think Henry could learn to do that?” said Allan. “I think it would do wonders for his self confidence. He'd feel very powerful.”

“Yes, I think it would,” said Denise. “Although a little gym work would help to build his physique as well. Part of Jamie's impact is his size.”

“True. Although small people can be very intimidating when they're aggressive.”

“Well, I'll ask Jamie to teach Henry. It surely can't hurt whatever happens.”

A faint rhythmic noise started in the room overhead and the pendant ceiling light in the lounge started to sway gently.

Denise glanced up and gave a little frown.

“He's such a sweet boy,” she said, “but I wish he wasn't so incredibly fit. That's the third time today and it isn't even dinner time.”

“Well, Julie doesn't seem to mind,” said Allan, laughing. “I wonder if she takes after her mother?”

Denise punched him hard on the shoulder.

Chapter Twelve

“HEE”

Jamie dropped into a crouch with his arms bent in front of him, parallel to the ground and quivering with tension. His biceps bulged and the tendons in his neck stood out like steel hawsers.

“KIA KINO NEI HOKI”

He slapped his thighs several time, hard, staring fiercely ahead of him. The birds in the garden stopped their singing.

“KA MA'TE KA MA'TE KA'ORA KA'ORA”

He slapped his chest then implored the gods then slapped his thighs and chest again. Even the traffic noise seemed to go quiet.

“Now you try.”

Henry's slim, pale torso was barely half the size of Jamie's but he dutifully dropped into a crouch.

“hee kia kino nei hoki” said Henry, touching his thighs and chest.

“Louder,” said Jamie

“hee kia kino nei hoki”

“Louder. I can't hear you. Put some effort into it.”

“hee kia kino nei hoki” Henry slapped his thighs hard repeatedly.

“Louder,” shouted Jamie. “Put some fucking heart into it. You're not scaring me!”

“HEE KIA KINO NEI HOKI”

Henry's thighs were beginning to feel sore.

“LOUDER!” shouted Jamie. “Feel it in your blood. Feel your anger. Project it to your enemy!”

“HEE KIA KINO NEI HOKI KA MA'TE KA MA'TE KA'ORA KA'ORA” roared Henry.

“You're scaring me! Good! Keep going!”

“TENEI TE TAN GATA PU HURU HURU”

Henry stabbed his hands forward then slapped the insides of his bent elbows and stamped hard on the ground. On the final “HEE” he thrust his head forward, bulged his eyes and stuck his tongue out at Jamie.

“That was good,” said Jamie. “Very good. Now do it again.”

Henry did it again. And again. And again, until his voice started to go hoarse and his chest burned fiercely. Sweat dripped from his face. His tongue hurt.

Jamie threw him a towel and slapped his shoulder. “Good work Henry. We'll stop for now. Do it again this afternoon.”

“Thanks,” wheezed Henry.

“Go inside and get some milk for your throat.”

Denise had some milk ready for both of them when they come in to the kitchen.

“Looked pretty impressive to me,” she said. “Julie and I were watching through the window.”

Henry swallowed a mouthful of milk, gently. Jamie swallowed his glassful in one gulp.

“We're getting there,” he said. “Henry's a hard worker. He just needs to learn to get angry and then keep it controlled and use the energy.”

“Yes, Henry doesn't get angry. He keeps it all quietly inside, don't you

sweetie.” She stroked his cheek and topped up his glass of milk.

“And we need to build his body weight,” said Jamie. “He’s naturally the wiry type which is fine but even so he could use being a little bigger.”

“Henry’s put on weight since he moved in,” said Denise. “He was as thin as a twig. Now he’s more like a stick.”

They both eyed him like a side of malnourished beef. Henry put his shirt back on and collapsed into a chair.

“There’s a gym in town. I’m taking Henry there tomorrow evening to put him through a basic workout. Make sure he eats plenty. He’ll be burning up more so he needs to eat at least half as much more than he does now or he’ll just get thinner,” Jamie said to Denise.

“Do you eat takeaways?” He turned his shaved head to Henry.

“No,” croaked Henry. “I like to cook my food myself.”

“Good man. Takeaways are just junk,” said Jamie. “Better than starving but not by much. Plenty of good, fresh, unprocessed food is what you need. Make sure you have plenty of carbohydrates for energy and plenty of protein to build your muscles. Cut out some of the fat as it slows your digestion. We want you eating more not less so the faster it goes through the better. Go take a shower and weigh yourself. I want to see a decent increase when I come back in a couple of months.”

He stared challengingly at Henry. Henry wilted.

“How did it go?” asked Allen when Henry came down after his shower.

“I felt really stupid,” said Henry.

“Oh that’s not good,” said Allan.

“But it got better,” said Henry. “Jamie made me shout louder and louder and after a while I started to feel bigger and stronger.” He

giggled to himself. "Even though it hurt I felt quite powerful. It was ... strange."

Allan smiled. It was good to see Henry feeling powerful. It made his face look a little more masculine and less like a worried puppy.

"Maybe all that shouting increases testosterone," he thought to himself. "Henry could surely use a shot of testosterone every now and then."

"Jamie said to do the Haka every day until it's second nature and then to do it when I get stressed," said Henry.

"What if you get stressed at work?" asked Allan. "You can't really do it in a crowded canteen."

"He said to do it in my head at times like that. Like just chant it and imagine I'm doing the moves."

Julie and Jamie joined them.

"Do you think the Haka really works?" Allan asked Jamie.

"Definitely," said Jamie. "It was created by a Maori tribal chieftain called Te Rauparaha in the early 1800s. His tribe had suffered a major defeat in the Musket wars and had become one of the smallest tribes on the islands. He developed the Haka as a way of improving his warriors' morale and decreasing their enemies' morale just before they went into battle and has become a significant part of New Zealand culture. Makes you feel strong, doesn't it?" glancing at Henry.

"Yes," Henry admitted, a little impressed with himself and more so at getting praise from Superman.

"I get all my lads in the unit to do it every day as routine and just before any exercise or operation," said Jamie. "It focuses the mind and gets the body into readiness for action and it's psychologically uplifting. It's a lot more powerful when you do it in a group as you know you have your team to support you but it's effective on its own as well."

“But does it really intimidate your enemies?” asked Denise.

Jamie smiled. “It intimidates quite a few.”

“What if you do it to someone who isn't intimidated?”

“Then they'll think you're a nutter and it's best to stay clear of nutters as they're unpredictable,” said Jamie with a laugh. Then he turned serious.

“Henry, if you get into a hostile situation, finish the Haka with this.”

He stood up and dropped into a Kung Fu style 'Ready' pose, with his weight on his back leg and hands held up in a loose open handed fighting position.

“Anyone still pushing the issue will then think you're a nutter who can do Kung Fu. They'll disappear, I guarantee it.”

“What if they don't” asked Julie.

“Leg it,” said Jamie. “Run away as fast you can because he's an even bigger nutter than you and you'll need firepower to take him out.”

When Henry went to work on Tuesday he could barely drive. His Monday introductory workout with Jamie had gone quite well, with Jamie showing him how to do a variety of exercises with free weights and exercise machines and on the whole staying within Henry's strength limits but the problems had started overnight. On Tuesday morning Henry was stiff and even muscles he hadn't known he had screamed in protest at their harsh treatment.

“It'll pass,” said Jamie. “Light workout on Wednesday and Friday and you'll be fine for next Monday.”

“That sounds good,” said Henry, “but I can barely stand today. I've got a full day's work ahead of me.”

Jamie fetched a tube of Ralgex from his bag.

“Rub yourself with this,” said Jamie, tossing Henry the tube. “Everywhere that hurts, except your eyes. They’ll sting.”

He rubbed some of the cream into Henry’s sore back and Henry managed to do his own arms and legs. After a few minutes his entire body started to glow and the pains eased a little. Julie kept the car windows wound fully open as he drove to work and Bryn swore loudly as soon as Henry walked into the canteen and he kept Henry away from any food handling tasks.

“No one’s going to fucking eat food that smells like that freaking shit,” he growled.

Henry explained that he had started going to a gym.

“Good. You need building up. But stop using that bleeding smelly stuff. I can’t have you contaminating the food.”

By the end of the day the smell had largely gone and Henry realised that he was going to have to tough it out.

On Wednesday Julie only cracked her window open a little as he drove them both to college. When the lecturer came in for Henry’s morning session on environmentally sustainable work practices, she got the group started on a practical exercise discovering non-sustainable work practices in a case study scenario then called out his name. When he acknowledged she told him that the Head of Catering wanted to see him during the morning break in his office on third floor.

Summonses like this always worried Henry. Invariably they meant he was in trouble for something and he usually had difficulty explaining whatever the misunderstanding was as people in authority rarely concerned themselves with Henry’s point of view.

“Who are you?” said John Davis, the Head of Catering, when he arrived at his office to find Henry waiting.

Henry gave his name and John rummaged among some papers on his desk as though the name sounded familiar.

“Ohh, yes,” he said, pulling out a sheet of paper. “Grab a seat” and sat down himself.

He read the document then looked at Henry's head.

“Hmm,” he said. “You know we have a dress code for catering students at this college?”

“Yes,” said Henry.

“You are not in compliance with that code,” said John.

“I don't understand,” said Henry.

“Your hat,” said John. “It's not an approved apprentice chef's hat.”

Henry reached up and touched his cap. He'd had got so used to wearing his Julie chosen cap that he'd forgotten it wasn't the right sort. He sighed, Julie would be angry.

“We have a dress code to ensure all students wear appropriate clothing at all times and maintain health and safety in the kitchen environment,” said John, wishing he didn't have to deal with this kind of trivial matter. He needed to spend time on the proposed budget cuts to the department and time was in even shorter supply than money.

Henry wondered what Bryn would say to John and decided it would be inappropriate. There were probably rules against swearing at teaching staff.

“It's what I wear at Ashton-Mole,” he said.

Henry mentally slapped his chest a few times and chanted “KA MA'TE KA MA'TE KA'ORA KA'ORA” loudly in his head and imagined sticking his tongue out at the Head of Department. John watched Henry's face change expression and decided it really wasn't worth the trouble. The budget cut would mean cutting half a member of staff and whilst there were one or two members of his team that he would like to cut in half he had to do it figuratively, not literally. He

sighed, this was a simple decision he could easily justify if challenged.

"It's your employer's requirement? Excellent. Drop me a note saying that by the end of the day and I'll authorise an exception. Goodbye."

Henry was delighted. The Haka worked! At lunch break he found Julie in the college canteen and told her.

"What a snotty old fool," she said, annoyed that the Head of Catering had gone against her fashion choice and simultaneously impressed that Henry had stood up for himself. "So the Haka worked, cool." She plucked Henry's hat off his head and put it on her own. A passing male student wolf whistled but she ignored him.

"What's a haka?" asked Leanne, one of the girls sitting with Julie.

"It's a war dance," Julie told her. "Henry's an expert."

"Ohhhh, coool" she said and the other two girls looked interested.

"Will you show us?" said Leanne. The other girls giggled and one gave Henry a leer. Julie laughed.

"I can't," said Henry in a panic, his joy at telling Julie rapidly evaporating. "It's too crowded in here."

"No probs," said Julie mischievously, "let's go in the car park."

She stood up and there was a flurry of activity as the other three collected their bags and coats.

"Come on Henry" and she marched off, naturally leading the group of girls.

"Henry!", she called as Henry hadn't left his seat.

Slowly Henry got up and followed, trembling with anxiety and embarrassment.

"Oh shit," he thought. "Oh shit shit shit shit shit shit."

Out in the car park the four girls stood in a group, waiting expectantly. Henry stood there, not knowing what to do.

“Go on, Henry,” said Julie. “You stand there and do the Haka for us.” She pointed to a spot not far from the entrance.

Henry looked around. There were a number of other students milling around in the car park and a group of smokers lounging not far away.

“hee kia kino nei hoki” said Henry, touching his thighs and chest.

“Take you shirt off,” said Julie. “That's how you're supposed to do it.”

“Oh god, please let me die” thought Henry. “Right now.”

Unfortunately he didn't have a heart attack even though his heart was pounding and the adrenaline was pumping enough to worry a casualty nurse. He took off his chef's jacket and removed his shirt and handed them to Julie.

One of the other girls giggled and Leanne waved at one of the smokers.

“hee kia kino nei hoki” said Henry, touching his thighs and chest.

“Louder you dumbass, LOUDERRRRRR” growled Jamie in Henry's head.

“HEE KIA KINO NEI HOKI KA MA'TE KA MA'TE KA'ORA KA'ORA,” roared Henry, pounding his thighs and slapping his chest the way Jamie had approved.

The girls went silent, as did the smokers. Several passing students stopped to watch.

Henry went through the entire routine, slowly advancing on the girls. One stepped back nervously.

When he'd finished Julie's group stared silently at him. Several of the smokers cheered. A couple of the watchers said “cool” and “neat” as

they dispersed. Someone came up to him and asked what it was.

"It was the Haka," Julie told him. "Cool," he said. "Wish I could do that."

Leanne licked her lips and said "Thank you" in a slightly quavery voice then she and the other two started giggling to each other as Julie handed Henry his clothes and he self-consciously got dressed. He faintly heard "did you see when he stuck out his tongue?" and some shrieks.

She watched the other three for a couple of moments then turned to Henry with a big smile.

"Come on, sweetie, I'll get you an ice cream. You look hot."

"You are joking," said Denise that evening when Julie told her about it. "Henry did the Haka at college? In public? Don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying," said Julie indignantly. "He did the Haka for me and some girlfriends."

"Wow," said Denise. "I'm speechless. Henry? Our Henry?"

"He was quite good. Leanne's got the hots for him now. Mind you, Leanne's got the hots for every guy at college but it's a start."

"How did Henry cope?"

"It took two ice creams for him to get over it," Julie admitted. "And he threw up the first one and he was still shaking when he went back to class. But he did it, mum. That's the thing, he did it."

"I can't believe it," said Denise. "Shy, timid little Henry? Wow."

"Can't believe what?" asked Jamie coming back from his afternoon run and not even breathing heavily.

"Henry did the Haka in front of a group of girls at college today," said Denise.

“So?” said Jamie.

“So Henry can't even talk to girls let alone dance for them,” said Denise.

“He still couldn't talk to them mum,” said Julie. “Even though Leanne tried.”

Jamie laughed. “I told you,” he said. “The Haka works on self confidence. When he's bulked up a bit he won't need to talk to them, they'll be queuing up just to watch.”

“Is that what you got up to in the Gulf?” said Julie, dangerously.

“No,” said Jamie. “There's only camels out there and they're not impressed.”

“You'd better not be trying to impress even camels.” Julie glared at him.

“The only person I've ever tried to impress is you,” said Jamie, “oh and my colour sergeant.” He took her in his arms. Julie lost interest in Henry so Denise went in search of him.

She found him in his room, lying on the bed. He hadn't laid out his uniform for the next day which was something he usually did when he got changed out of the old one.

“I hear you had some fun at college today,” she said.

Henry groaned. “I was so embarrassed” he said. “I couldn't get out of it. Julie was goading me and ...” He held up his hands, “look, I'm still shaking. I have no idea what afternoon class was about.”

Denise sat on the edge of the bed and gave him a hug.

“I'm proud of you,” she said. “Very, very proud.”

She gave him a long look then said “shall I do dinner tonight?”

“No,” said Henry ruefully. “I’ll do it. I need something to make me feel normal again. I’ll be down in a minute or two.”

“OK,” said Denise and went downstairs. On the way she wondered when Henry would realise that his old 'normal' was fast disappearing.

Henry lay on his bed for a couple of minutes. His waning shock at what he had done was being replaced by a new thought. “Denise is proud of me. No one's ever been proud of me before. Oh lord.”

Then something else struck him. The girls had liked watching him. Now that was really scary.

Chapter Thirteen

Henry had the house to himself and he was lonely.

Denise had gone straight from work to spend the weekend with Allan at Allan's house and wouldn't be back until after work on Monday evening. As the next day was the second Saturday in June and therefore the Queen's Birthday, Julie had gone to Taunton to be Jamie's official guest at his unit's annual dinner. Each year the Royal Marine Corps formally honoured their ultimate boss by celebrating her official birthday with a dinner, Her Majesty being the Commander-in-Chief of the British Armed Forces. Taunton was the base for 40 Commando, Jamie's unit, which was this year playing host to the Captain General Royal Marines, the ceremonial head of the Corps. It wasn't Julie's first Marine dinner but it was by far the most prestigious and she'd dithered over outfits for weeks. She wouldn't be back until Monday either.

When Henry got back from the gym after work he cooked himself a solitary dinner and faced the prospect of two entire days of solitude. He'd had some good news that day but there was no one to share it with. While he ate in the stillness, he wondered what to do to occupy himself. Friday evening was easy, he'd have a bath and watch some TV then go to bed. He toyed with the thought of going shopping on Saturday as he could use some new clothes but there'd be no Julie to help him and he wasn't confident about what she'd consider sufficiently stylish. He could always go to the cinema but when he checked the listings there was nothing that appealed to him. Even if he did go to the cinema that would still leave all of Sunday. Henry didn't even have any coursework to do as the first year of his course had finished the previous Wednesday and the second year didn't start for another three months.

Henry decided he would spend some time on Saturday looking at the used car dealers as he was getting a pay rise and could use another car. His old one was decidedly tatty as it was already fairly old when he'd bought it three years previously and he hadn't been able to get rid of the chocolate milk stain on the passenger seat from when he'd had to spend an uncomfortable night in the car. He watched a cooking show on TV for a while but wasn't impressed at the skills of the

winner of the contest. Some of the losers obviously had far better basic skills although he conceded to himself that the winner did have a certain artistic flair.

"I can't really see the point of competitive cooking," he said aloud to reassure himself, "since the judging has to be all about the judge's personal likes and dislikes, even over something as simple as the amount of salt."

He shut the TV off and sat there listening as the occasional car drove by and lit up the lounge briefly. He got up and shut the curtains. He went upstairs and stripped off his jeans and t-shirt in his room then, feeling decidedly naughty and rebellious, he walked slowly to the bathroom completely naked.

"One day I'll get my own place and walk around naked whenever I want," he said aloud to his reflection in the mirror then paused for a moment to think about this. He'd never thought about getting a place of his own before. Even when his parents had kicked him out he hadn't thought seriously about getting somewhere else to live, let alone on his own. All he'd done was make a tentative arrangement to stay with his friend who, when it came to the crunch, let him down and then jumped at the opportunity when Julie had said her mother needed a lodger.

"I wonder what Clive is up to now?" he said to his reflection. "I don't think I've seen him since then. Maybe I should get in touch with him or George or Sebastian and see if they want to catch up over the weekend."

As he brushed his teeth, Henry realised that the prospect didn't particularly grab him. Those guys were from his old days and so much had changed since then. He didn't think they'd understand. After all, none of them had sought him out in the last year or so just as he hadn't sought them out.

"I suppose that's what that guy meant," Henry thought to himself, remembering a line from a book he'd read at school. "The past is foreign country," the author had said. "Yes" said Henry, "a far off distant country that I don't want to go back to."

He turned on the taps to run a nice hot bath and realised Julie wasn't there to occupy the bathroom for most of the evening before going out. He'd be able to have a long leisurely bath, a relaxing soak, rather than his usual Friday night quick shower while Julie was temporarily out of the bathroom choosing something in her room.

This raised a new problem however. Being unused to long baths, Henry didn't quite know what to do while soaking for an extended period. He wandered, still daringly, deliciously, naked back to his room and browsed through his book collection. Apart from a respectable quantity of cookery books and a handful of fairly dull books he'd brought over from his parents', Henry only had one other book. It was a thriller given to him by Jamie as a gift the previous Christmas by Andy McNab, a former SAS soldier that Jamie approved of. As far as Henry could tell, the only failing the SAS had in Jamie's eyes were that they thought, erroneously, that they were better than the SBS, which had formerly been a Marines special unit. Either way, Henry didn't really want to read about the exploits of a fictional SAS soldier now working for British Intelligence. He much preferred the quiet life.

He wandered back to the bathroom to check the bath level and temperature. Down beside the toilet he spotted a copy of Cosmopolitan Magazine which Denise and Julie both read and was usually in one or other's bedroom. He pulled it out and looked at the extremely attractive girl on the cover. He decided he couldn't be bothered to go downstairs to find a book and would browse Cosmo instead.

The bath water was too hot so he let some cold water run in then climbed into the bath and gingerly lowered himself. He stood up again when he realised he'd left the bathroom door open and sat down again when he remembered that no one would be coming in. He started flicking through the pages. It seemed Khloé Kardashian had been posting strange messages on Instagram but since Henry had no idea who Khloé Kardashian was and only a vague notion of what Instagram was the article wasn't particularly interesting.

The next article on how to do winged eyeliner was interesting though as Julie often had that kind of eye makeup and Henry had wondered how she did it. Apparently you needed a steady hand and a lot of

patience which alone was interesting as Henry had always assumed that girls automatically knew how to apply makeup. The few times he'd seen Julie doing her makeup she'd seemed to him to have the skill and confidence of a professional artist. One technique apparently was to outline the shape of the wings with tiny dots of eye liner, which presumably was some sort of makeup for eyes only although what it lined Henry couldn't imagine, and when satisfied with the dots, connect them together. That seemed easy enough. Another technique, which made more sense to Henry, was to use a small piece of paper as a guiding edge. It all seemed to be a lot of effort but well worth it as Julie had gorgeous eyes when she was done. Mind you she had gorgeous eyes anyway, especially when they crinkled around the edges as she smiled.

Henry studied several pages of fashion clothing quite closely and then skipped an article on why everyone hates Geminis. He wasn't a fan of astrology and wasn't convinced everyone did hate Geminis. He wasn't sure who he knew that might be a Gemini but he didn't particularly hate anyone. Now this looked promising. "Is Kissing On A First Date A Good Or Bad Sign?" Henry had never been on a first date, nor had he ever kissed a girl, other than his mother and his aunt, which he was sure didn't count for the article, so it would be useful to know what was expected if and when a first date happened.

It seemed that eleven women had contributed their thoughts on the matter to the magazine. The first lady said she never kissed on the first date. The second said she only kissed on the first date of she was intending to go home with the man, which Henry didn't really understand. Was it really a date if she was going home with him like he was her husband? Hmmm. The third lady said she assumed that if her date did not kiss her then he didn't really like her and wouldn't bother to see him again. The fourth talked about a bad kisser she'd once known and didn't really answer the question. Henry made a mental note to investigate what good and bad kissing was. He didn't know how to find out but Julie might be able to help as she kissed quite a lot and she must have learned somewhere. The other seven didn't express any opinion one way or another. They basically said "it depends" but didn't specify what it depended upon. Henry found the article unsatisfactory. How was he expected to learn when one said yes, one said no and nine said maybe. He tossed the magazine across

the bathroom and lay back, adding some more hot water as the bath was beginning to get cool. With the water nice and hot again his thoughts began to drift.

"I suppose one day I'll go on a first date with a girl," he thought to himself. "I wonder if a girl will ever come up to me and ask me out?"

"You'd freak out if a girl ever did," he answered himself.

"I suppose so," he thought. "It would be nice to be asked though."

"If you wait to be asked you might wait forever," came unbidden.

"That hasn't really occurred to me before," he thought. "I wonder if that's why all those people go to nightclubs? To meet other people and ask them out and maybe kiss them?"

He remembered Julie's friend Shazza who had been avidly kissing that man the one and only time he'd been to a nightclub. Hmmm.

"On TV the guy usually asks the girl out. I wonder why that is. And that woman in the article said if the man didn't try to kiss her she assumed he didn't like her. Why didn't she kiss him if she liked him?"

"Nobody ever offered me a job unless I asked first. Like I had to ask HR for the job in the canteen. They wouldn't have offered it to me if I hadn't asked."

"I wonder if it's the same with girls. Like at that club Julie never went up to any of the guys, they all came to her."

"Maybe I should go up to a girl and ask her out? That way we'd have a first date and I could find out if she wanted to be kissed or not."

"Wow!"

"I don't see why I couldn't. After all, I talk to lots of people now. All the people who come to the canteen at work and even some of the people on the course. And Julie, she's easy to talk to."

“So what do I do if a girl says yes?”

Henry thought about this for a while.

“I suppose we could go for coffee. I could talk to her about cooking. Girls like cooking.”

“Well, Julie doesn't. But they seem to on TV.”

“And there's the cinema. I've seen loads of people kissing at the cinema. Maybe that's a good place to go for a first kiss where it's dark so you don't scare each other.”

“Or maybe we could go for a coffee and then go to the cinema! Wouldn't that be cool.”

“I wonder if she'll look like Julie?”

“It couldn't be any harder than making that video for the 'Working With Others' unit.”

“Yeah, it'll be cool to go out and talk to a girl. Julie will be proud of me.”

“Girls like to talk. Maybe all I'll have to do is say 'Hello' and she'll do all the talking after that.”

“How about that mall? Lots of girls go there.”

“But they go in groups don't they. I don't think I could face trying to talk to a group of girls. What if they laugh at me? They're always laughing and giggling.”

“But I could go to the mall and just see if there are any girls on their own. A girl on her own wouldn't laugh at me. She might be glad of some company.”

“Yeah!”

“I can do it.”

“Girls are human after all.”

“Aren't they?”

“So why don't I go to the mall tomorrow and just sit in a cafe and see if there are any girls on their own?”

“Yeah!”

“And maybe go to that nightclub that Julie took me to. The girls there expected men to talk to them.”

“Yeah!”

“But I can't dance.” Hmmm.

“And it was very noisy.”

“OK the mall it is. A nice quiet spot where we can talk properly.”

“And maybe she'll kiss me.”

Henry went to bed and dreamt vividly about death.

“Denise says that dreaming about death is a sign that things are about to change majorly,” he said to himself over breakfast. “That's got to be good hasn't it?”

By 9am Henry had got dressed and was sitting in the lounge.

“Maybe it's a little early for the mall,” he thought. He watched TV for half an hour then went to his room to change.

“Think positively,” he said out loud to himself. “He who dares wins!”

His courage deserted him and he went back upstairs to change back into his pyjamas and dressing gown.

“Oh, this is absurd,” he said to the kettle. “At least if I'm at the mall a girl might come up and talk to me. No one will ever come to the

house looking for me.”

He went back upstairs and put on a pair of shorts and went into the garden.

“Jamie isn't scared of girls.”

“Well, he's scared of Julie. I wonder if she talked to him first?”

Henry did the Haka.

“Look out girls! Here I come!”

He went back upstairs and changed into his best jeans and a checked shirt Julie liked. He went downstairs and got into his car. He then got out of the car and went back and got his wallet. Sitting behind the steering wheel, key in the ignition he started to shake.

“What if she laughs at me?”

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Henry had just ordered yet another coffee when he saw her. She was a nice looking girl. Roughly his age with short dark hair and glasses. She sat at a vacant table inside the cafe and didn't look like she was meeting anyone. She didn't look around while she was waiting for her drink, for example. She pulled a magazine from her bag and started to flick through it.

"That's a good sign," Henry thought to himself. "Here's your chance."

He cleared his throat and smoothed his hair.

"Just go up to her and say 'Hello'" and see what she does," he thought. "That's all, how hard can it be? Just be polite. She can't be offended if I'm polite. Ask her if the magazine is any good."

He sat there watching her surreptitiously. His heart started to pound.

"Just go and say hello!"

She glanced over at him as if aware he was watching her. Henry instantly grabbed a menu and studied it.

"That was stupid," he said to himself. "You should have smiled at her. She probably thinks you're an idiot now."

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“Just say ‘hello’” he told himself, “just say ‘hello’.”

He opened his mouth to speak, conscious that his mouth was so dry his lips were sticking to his teeth. Then he was shoved hard in the small of his back as a man slipped into the seat next to the goddess.

“Miranda, darling, sorry I’m late. Have you ordered?”

Henry felt dizzy with relief and staggered out of the cafe. He had to get away to safety before everyone in the cafe started laughing at him. He stopped outside the post office and leaned weakly against the glass window, staring blindly down the mall. After a minute or two he became aware of a rapid tapping coming from behind him. He turned and looked through the window. An attractive middle aged woman in a post office uniform was rapping the glass with a coin, She mouthed “Don’t lean against the window” at him and gestured for him to move on. He moved on.

“I know what I did wrong,” Henry thought to himself a few minutes later when he’d found a vacant bench in the middle of the mall to sit on. “I didn’t chant the Haka to prepare myself. I went in unprepared, like Jamie says you should never do.”

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“Ka ma'te ka ma'te ka'ora ka'ora,” Henry said to himself. “Just say 'hello' and ask her how she is. It's not that hard at all. I do it every day to Bryn and Deb in the canteen.”

He walked calmly up to her, in something of a trance. He stood in front of her, focused totally on her face which looked to be gentle and kind. Her pink hair framed her face.

“Hello,” said Henry, “how are you?”

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“You made him cry,” she said accusingly.

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The lunchtime crowds were thinning out and he found himself a seat on another bench. Three hours later he decided to go home. He had only seen one other girl who was on her own and she'd given him a look of total contempt when she saw he was looking at her.

“It's not like this on TV,” he thought sadly to himself. “I'm going to die alone.”

Chapter Fourteen

Henry had the house to himself and he was lonely.

Denise had gone straight from work to spend the weekend with Allan at Allan's house and wouldn't be back until after work on Monday evening. As the next day was the second Saturday in June and therefore the Queen's Birthday, Julie had gone to Taunton to be Jamie's official guest at his unit's annual dinner. Each year the Royal Marine Corps formally honoured their ultimate boss by celebrating her official birthday with a dinner, Her Majesty being the Commander-in-Chief of the British Armed Forces. Taunton was the base for 40 Commando, Jamie's unit, which was this year playing host to the Captain General Royal Marines, the ceremonial head of the Corps. It wasn't Julie's first Marine dinner but it was by far the most prestigious and she'd dithered over outfits for weeks. She wouldn't be back until Monday either.

When Henry got back from the gym after work he cooked himself a solitary dinner and faced the prospect of two entire days of solitude. He'd had some good news that day but there was no one to share it with. While he ate in the stillness, he wondered what to do to occupy himself. Friday evening was easy, he'd have a bath and watch some TV then go to bed. He toyed with the thought of going shopping on Saturday as he could use some new clothes but there'd be no Julie to help him and he wasn't confident about what she'd consider sufficiently stylish. He could always go to the cinema but when he checked the listings there was nothing that appealed to him. Even if he did go to the cinema that would still leave all of Sunday. Henry didn't even have any coursework to do as the first year of his course had finished the previous Wednesday and the second year didn't start for another three months.

Henry decided he would spend some time on Saturday looking at the used car dealers as he was getting a pay rise and could use another car. His old one was decidedly tatty as it was already fairly old when he'd bought it three years previously and he hadn't been able to get rid of the chocolate milk stain on the passenger seat from when he'd had to spend an uncomfortable night in the car. He watched a cooking show on TV for a while but wasn't impressed at the skills of the

winner of the contest. Some of the losers obviously had far better basic skills although he conceded to himself that the winner did have a certain artistic flair.

"I can't really see the point of competitive cooking," he said aloud to reassure himself, "since the judging has to be all about the judge's personal likes and dislikes, even over something as simple as the amount of salt."

He shut the TV off and sat there listening as the occasional car drove by and lit up the lounge briefly. He got up and shut the curtains. He went upstairs and stripped off his jeans and t-shirt in his room then, feeling decidedly naughty and rebellious, he walked slowly to the bathroom completely naked.

"One day I'll get my own place and walk around naked whenever I want," he said aloud to his reflection in the mirror then paused for a moment to think about this. He'd never thought about getting a place of his own before. Even when his parents had kicked him out he hadn't thought seriously about getting somewhere else to live, let alone on his own. All he'd done was make a tentative arrangement to stay with his friend who, when it came to the crunch, let him down and then jumped at the opportunity when Julie had said her mother needed a lodger.

"I wonder what Clive is up to now?" he said to his reflection. "I don't think I've seen him since then. Maybe I should get in touch with him or George or Sebastian and see if they want to catch up over the weekend."

As he brushed his teeth, Henry realised that the prospect didn't particularly grab him. Those guys were from his old days and so much had changed since then. He didn't think they'd understand. After all, none of them had sought him out in the last year or so just as he hadn't sought them out.

"I suppose that's what that guy meant," Henry thought to himself, remembering a line from a book he'd read at school. "The past is foreign country," the author had said. "Yes" said Henry, "a far off distant country that I don't want to go back to."

He turned on the taps to run a nice hot bath and realised Julie wasn't there to occupy the bathroom for most of the evening before going out. He'd be able to have a long leisurely bath, a relaxing soak, rather than his usual Friday night quick shower while Julie was temporarily out of the bathroom choosing something in her room.

This raised a new problem however. Being unused to long baths, Henry didn't quite know what to do while soaking for an extended period. He wandered, still daringly, deliciously, naked back to his room and browsed through his book collection. Apart from a respectable quantity of cookery books and a handful of fairly dull books he'd brought over from his parents', Henry only had one other book. It was a thriller given to him by Jamie as a gift the previous Christmas by Andy McNab, a former SAS soldier that Jamie approved of. As far as Henry could tell, the only failing the SAS had in Jamie's eyes were that they thought, erroneously, that they were better than the SBS, which had formerly been a Marines special unit. Either way, Henry didn't really want to read about the exploits of a fictional SAS soldier now working for British Intelligence. He much preferred the quiet life.

He wandered back to the bathroom to check the bath level and temperature. Down beside the toilet he spotted a copy of Cosmopolitan Magazine which Denise and Julie both read and was usually in one or other's bedroom. He pulled it out and looked at the extremely attractive girl on the cover. He decided he couldn't be bothered to go downstairs to find a book and would browse Cosmo instead.

The bath water was too hot so he let some cold water run in then climbed into the bath and gingerly lowered himself. He stood up again when he realised he'd left the bathroom door open and sat down again when he remembered that no one would be coming in. He started flicking through the pages. It seemed Khloé Kardashian had been posting strange messages on Instagram but since Henry had no idea who Khloé Kardashian was and only a vague notion of what Instagram was the article wasn't particularly interesting.

The next article on how to do winged eyeliner was interesting though as Julie often had that kind of eye makeup and Henry had wondered how she did it. Apparently you needed a steady hand and a lot of

patience which alone was interesting as Henry had always assumed that girls automatically knew how to apply makeup. The few times he'd seen Julie doing her makeup she'd seemed to him to have the skill and confidence of a professional artist. One technique apparently was to outline the shape of the wings with tiny dots of eye liner, which presumably was some sort of makeup for eyes only although what it lined Henry couldn't imagine, and when satisfied with the dots, connect them together. That seemed easy enough. Another technique, which made more sense to Henry, was to use a small piece of paper as a guiding edge. It all seemed to be a lot of effort but well worth it as Julie had gorgeous eyes when she was done. Mind you she had gorgeous eyes anyway, especially when they crinkled around the edges as she smiled.

Henry studied several pages of fashion clothing quite closely and then skipped an article on why everyone hates Geminis. He wasn't a fan of astrology and wasn't convinced everyone did hate Geminis. He wasn't sure who he knew that might be a Gemini but he didn't particularly hate anyone. Now this looked promising. "Is Kissing On A First Date A Good Or Bad Sign?" Henry had never been on a first date, nor had he ever kissed a girl, other than his mother and his aunt, which he was sure didn't count for the article, so it would be useful to know what was expected if and when a first date happened.

It seemed that eleven women had contributed their thoughts on the matter to the magazine. The first lady said she never kissed on the first date. The second said she only kissed on the first date of she was intending to go home with the man, which Henry didn't really understand. Was it really a date if she was going home with him like he was her husband? Hmmm. The third lady said she assumed that if her date did not kiss her then he didn't really like her and wouldn't bother to see him again. The fourth talked about a bad kisser she'd once known and didn't really answer the question. Henry made a mental note to investigate what good and bad kissing was. He didn't know how to find out but Julie might be able to help as she kissed quite a lot and she must have learned somewhere. The other seven didn't express any opinion one way or another. They basically said "it depends" but didn't specify what it depended upon. Henry found the article unsatisfactory. How was he expected to learn when one said yes, one said no and nine said maybe. He tossed the magazine across

the bathroom and lay back, adding some more hot water as the bath was beginning to get cool. With the water nice and hot again his thoughts began to drift.

"I suppose one day I'll go on a first date with a girl," he thought to himself. "I wonder if a girl will ever come up to me and ask me out?"

"You'd freak out if a girl ever did," he answered himself.

"I suppose so," he thought. "It would be nice to be asked though."

"If you wait to be asked you might wait forever," came unbidden.

"That hasn't really occurred to me before," he thought. "I wonder if that's why all those people go to nightclubs? To meet other people and ask them out and maybe kiss them?"

He remembered Julie's friend Shazza who had been avidly kissing that man the one and only time he'd been to a nightclub. Hmmm.

"On TV the guy usually asks the girl out. I wonder why that is. And that woman in the article said if the man didn't try to kiss her she assumed he didn't like her. Why didn't she kiss him if she liked him?"

"Nobody ever offered me a job unless I asked first. Like I had to ask HR for the job in the canteen. They wouldn't have offered it to me if I hadn't asked."

"I wonder if it's the same with girls. Like at that club Julie never went up to any of the guys, they all came to her."

"Maybe I should go up to a girl and ask her out? That way we'd have a first date and I could find out if she wanted to be kissed or not."

"Wow!"

"I don't see why I couldn't. After all, I talk to lots of people now. All the people who come to the canteen at work and even some of the people on the course. And Julie, she's easy to talk to."

“So what do I do if a girl says yes?”

Henry thought about this for a while.

“I suppose we could go for coffee. I could talk to her about cooking. Girls like cooking.”

“Well, Julie doesn't. But they seem to on TV.”

“And there's the cinema. I've seen loads of people kissing at the cinema. Maybe that's a good place to go for a first kiss where it's dark so you don't scare each other.”

“Or maybe we could go for a coffee and then go to the cinema! Wouldn't that be cool.”

“I wonder if she'll look like Julie?”

“It couldn't be any harder than making that video for the 'Working With Others' unit.”

“Yeah, it'll be cool to go out and talk to a girl. Julie will be proud of me.”

“Girls like to talk. Maybe all I'll have to do is say 'Hello' and she'll do all the talking after that.”

“How about that mall? Lots of girls go there.”

“But they go in groups don't they. I don't think I could face trying to talk to a group of girls. What if they laugh at me? They're always laughing and giggling.”

“But I could go to the mall and just see if there are any girls on their own. A girl on her own wouldn't laugh at me. She might be glad of some company.”

“Yeah!”

“I can do it.”

“Girls are human after all.”

“Aren't they?”

“So why don't I go to the mall tomorrow and just sit in a cafe and see if there are any girls on their own?”

“Yeah!”

“And maybe go to that nightclub that Julie took me to. The girls there expected men to talk to them.”

“Yeah!”

“But I can't dance.” Hmmm.

“And it was very noisy.”

“OK the mall it is. A nice quiet spot where we can talk properly.”

“And maybe she'll kiss me.”

Henry went to bed and dreamt vividly about death.

“Denise says that dreaming about death is a sign that things are about to change majorly,” he said to himself over breakfast. “That's got to be good hasn't it?”

By 9am Henry had got dressed and was sitting in the lounge.

“Maybe it's a little early for the mall,” he thought. He watched TV for half an hour then went to his room to change.

“Think positively,” he said out loud to himself. “He who dares wins!”

His courage deserted him and he went back upstairs to change back into his pyjamas and dressing gown.

“Oh, this is absurd,” he said to the kettle. “At least if I'm at the mall a girl might come up and talk to me. No one will ever come to the

house looking for me.”

He went back upstairs and put on a pair of shorts and went into the garden.

“Jamie isn't scared of girls.”

“Well, he's scared of Julie. I wonder if she talked to him first?”

Henry did the Haka.

“Look out girls! Here I come!”

He went back upstairs and changed into his best jeans and a checked shirt Julie liked. He went downstairs and got into his car. He then got out of the car and went back and got his wallet. Sitting behind the steering wheel, key in the ignition he started to shake.

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“You made him cry,” she said accusingly.

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The lunchtime crowds were thinning out and he found himself a seat on another bench. Three hours later he decided to go home. He had only seen one other girl who was on her own and she'd given him a look of total contempt when she saw he was looking at her.

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Chapter Fifteen

"I've done a roster for August," said Henry, "but how am I going to get the staff to like me? There's always some bad hours or nasty jobs that need doing. I've been reading my book for a week and haven't found anything in it that helps."

"You never will," said Allan. "If one person likes you for the way you've done the roster it'll be at someone else's expense and they'll hate you. Most management tasks are like that."

"So what do I do?" asked Henry, forlornly. It seemed like he was going to fail at the first hurdle yet again.

"You need to understand that Bryn was giving you a test when he said everyone must like you. If you try to make everyone like you you'll fail badly and even if you do manage to do it with the people there now, someone'll leave and you can be sure that trying to make the new person like you will piss off everyone else."

Denise brought in some tea and sat down next to Allan.

"The most important thing is that everyone respects you," said Allan. "It doesn't matter if they like you so long as they respect you and your decisions. And the best way to do that is to start out tough. You can always lighten up later once people know you're the boss but you absolutely mustn't let people walk all over you."

"That won't be easy for Henry," said Denise. "He's so obliging."

"You also need to be fair," said Allen. "Make sure you do your fair share of the bad and that everyone else does their fair share of the bad and if anyone doesn't like it do not change it otherwise everyone will try to make you change it and you'll end up with a mess. No favourites and no victims. What do you do with the roster? Do you post it up somewhere or hand it out or what?"

"Bryn usually just posts it on the notice board," said Henry.

Allan thought for a few moments.

"This is what I'd do," he said. "I'd wait until there's a suitable moment then post the roster on the notice board then call everyone together and tell them that you have posted the new roster and stay where you are while they all look at it. Then if anyone objects they have to do it publicly and you stay firm. That way everyone can see you stand by it and don't let anyone support you either because if you do people will think you're playing favourites."

He paused for thought again.

"And don't dither. Say what you have to say without any ummms and errs and then shut up. Never ask if it's OK or if they agree, that's a sign of weakness."

Julie and Jamie joined them in the lounge. Jamie was back for a weekend's leave.

"We're just talking about how to manage staff and get them to follow orders," said Allan. "What do you do?"

"Court martial anyone who doesn't follow orders," said Jamie. "Much easier in the services. Civilians never do what they're told."

"So you've no advice for Henry?" asked Allan.

"Only two things," said Jamie. "One, give your orders and don't change them unless there's a tactical change in the situation. Order – Counter order – Disorder is my motto. Change the orders and everyone gets confused."

"That's what I've been saying," said Allan. "What's the other thing?"

"If you have any trouble makers, never let them get behind you when engaging the enemy."

"Why's that?" asked Denise.

"No one asks what direction a bullet came from," said Jamie seriously. "It's as easy to be shot in the back as in the front."

The others were silent for a minute or two while they contemplated this aspect of management that wasn't a consideration normally.

"Well, there are a lot of knives in a kitchen, Henry, metaphorical as well as real ones," said Allan. "Watch your back."

"Oh lord," thought Henry, "do I really want this job?" knowing full well that he did.

"I've just thought," he said out loud to no one in particular. "If they're going to hate me anyway, I've got nothing to lose."

"Correct," said Jamie. "You've got your orders so carry them out."

"And another thing," added Allan. "Only explain things that need to be explained like how to do something. Never explain why you're doing something or you'll end up having to explain everything you do all the time."

"OK," said Henry. "I think I understand." Fortunately Monday was a long way off. He had a day and a half to find another job.

"There's something else I wanted to ask about," he said, reaching for his book and opening it to the marked page.

"Leil Lowndes says there are two kinds of people. Those who go into a room and say 'Here I am' and those who go into a room and say 'There you are', but he doesn't explain what he means very well." Henry looked around pleadingly.

"Actually, that's a good line" said Denise. "Someone who says 'here I am' is being self-centred and not showing any interest in the other person whereas the one who says 'there you are' is showing they're interested in the other person and isn't being egotistical."

"People like other people who are interested in them," chimed in Julie. "No one likes an arrogant show-off."

"How do you mean?" said Henry.

“Well you like Bryn don't you?” said Denise.

Henry nodded.

“Does he talk about himself all the time?”

“No,” said Henry after thinking about it for a few moments.

“That's right” said Denise. “He talks about you and how you're getting on and he's showing he thinks you're important. If he was always talking about what he does and never showed any interest in you you'd probably not like him as much.”

“I see,” said Henry, “so when I talk to someone I should be talking about them, not me?”

“Yes, unless they ask you something about yourself then you should answer their question. But think about it. If they never ask you about yourself and only want to talk about themselves, would you really like them? It's a two way thing you see.”

“Actually that does make sense, kind of.”

Henry turned to another page.

“There's another thing he says. Umm, yes here. 'You've only got ten seconds to show you're somebody'. Doesn't that mean talking about yourself and isn't it contradicting the other thing?”

“No,” said Allan. “He's not talking about boasting about your achievements. He's talking about how hard it is to change someone's mind. It's more about creating a first impression. If you come across badly to start with it's difficult to change the other person's mind later. So, for example, erm, let me think. Oh yes, here's an extreme example. Suppose a stranger comes up to you and says 'You're a dickhead' then every time you meet them after that you're going to assume that whatever they say is an insult even if it actually isn't.”

“Ohhh,” said Henry. “That makes sense. So if someone comes up to you and says “You're a wonderful person' the next time you're going to

think they're nice before they've even said anything.”

“Pretty much,” said Denise.

Henry thought about this for a while.

“So what do people think when they meet me for the first time?” asked Henry.

Denise, Allan and Julie stayed quiet so Jamie took the bullet for them.

“You don't say anything,” he said, “and if you do it's so full of umms and errs that they think you're an idiot.”

“Ooops,” said Allan softly. Denise and Julie looked at each other.

Henry thought about this for a while too.

“You're right,” he said at last. “I get so scared when I talk to strangers and I guess that makes them feel bad. I wouldn't like it if someone was scared to talk to me.”

He fumbled awkwardly with his book.

“So what should I do?” he asked.

“Decide what you're going to say then say it clearly and without hesitation then shut up,” said Jamie.

“Nooooooo,” interjected Julie. “Maybe in the marines but not in real life. You need to listen to what the other person says in reply and then reply to that. There's nothing worse than someone saying a load of unrelated things like they're filling in a form. You need to show you are interested in what they are saying and try to build on it.”

Denise nodded her agreement. “Sometimes someone says something that just kills the conversation but most of the time you should be able to think of something that carries on what they just said.”

“So doesn't that contradict what Allan was saying about the roster? He

said to tell them the new roster's on the board and not to discuss it."

Allan laughed loudly. "Ohh Henry," he said. "That's the fundamental difference between talking to people and managing people. When you talk to someone you want them to like you and when you manage someone you want them to do what they're told. Not the same thing."

"Riiiiiight," said Henry. "It's starting to make sense now."

"That's why Bryn shouldn't have told you to get them to like you. You need to get them to do what you tell them whether they like you or not."

Henry decided he'd go back to the canteen on Monday after all and not try to find another job, at least not just yet. Now he had a better understanding he just might be able to get somewhere with it after all.

"Can I ask something about relationships?" said Henry, all fired up and ready to explore this strange new world.

"No," said Denise firmly. "One thing at a time. You need to be able to talk to someone before you can have a relationship with them."

Up in his room that evening, Henry lay in bed and stressed about the roster.

"I'm sure I've been as fair as I can to everyone, and I've given myself the job of cleaning the ovens so no one can complain about that. So how do I introduce it?"

"If I just put it up like Bryn does then maybe no one will pay any attention to it because they'll know Bryn didn't do it. Allan's right, they're got to know I did it and that I'm going to be doing it from now on."

"Oh lord, Jo will hate it."

"So when to do it? Probably best after the morning break when things are quiet for a bit. And how do I get everyone to hear me? What if they ignore me? Or laugh and think I'm stupid for pretending to be

the boss. Oh god, please let me die, or at least be sick on Monday.”

“Chris always goes for a smoke after the break rush. Should I wait til he comes back or do it before?”

“Best do it when Bryn's not there. I can't face him watching me screw it up. Or worse, having to step in.”

“I could always sell the Toyota if I can't find another job for a while.”

“Make sure I have a glass of water with me, that's a good idea.”

“So maybe I should bang something so everyone pays attention?”

“Oh god.”

On Sunday he went for a drive in his new car. It was still running beautifully after four days but the warm sun did nothing to dispel his feeling that the world was about to end, despite his repeated rehearsals of a small speech he'd prepared.

Julie chatted normally on the way to work on Monday morning. She had apparently forgotten about his upcoming ordeal. Henry wondered if he ought to warn her about getting the bus home as he'd likely be sacked. He decided he'd just hang around until Julie finished work and drive her home as usual. At least she'd still be friendly.

As the morning wore on Henry got involved in his work and forgot about the roster until just before the morning break then panicked and scrambled to find the usb stick he'd stored it on. He ducked into Bryn's office to print it out.

“Just need to print the roster,” he muttered to Bryn who was searching through a filing cabinet. Bryn just grunted and carried on searching.

As the primary cook, Henry had little to do during the morning break as he'd finished the food preparation so he went to the toilet four times and tried to calm his beating heart. As the canteen emptied and the other canteen staff tidied away, he chanted the Haka to himself.

“It's now or never,” he thought. “Whatever happens it'll all be over in a few minutes,”

He stood up, his knees weak and his heart pounding, shaking with tension. He picked up his printed roster and went to the notice board. Pulling down the old roster he used the drawing pins to put up the new one then turned to survey the kitchen.

Chris was just about to finish washing some metal trays so he would be going for his ciggie any minute.

“Oh god,” thought Henry. He went and stood at the end of the main preparation table. No one took any notice as they were all engaged in whatever they were doing before taking a break.

“Umm, err excuse me everyone,” croaked Henry, his mouth as dry as the Sahara.

No one heard him.

“Err, please,” said Henry, going red with embarrassment.

No one heard him.

“Oh lord,” thought Henry, his heart sinking to his feet. “What do I do now?”

He half turned, wanting to run away and hide and knocked a metal ladle off the table. It clattered to the floor and Deb and Jo looked up to see what had happened. Henry bent over and picked it up.

“Bang something!” he thought to himself.

He picked up the lid of a 100 litre stock pot and banged the ladle against it several times. Everyone stopped what they were doing and turned to look at him. Bryn came to the door of his office behind Henry to see what was happening then quickly stepped back out of sight, half closing the door so he could still hear.

Henry froze. Not one word of the fine speech he'd composed came in

to his mind. He stared back at them, unable to speak and turning pinker by the second.

He cleared his throat, his mouth suddenly dry.

“Damn, I forget to get some water,” he thought. “Oh god I’ve got to say something, anything.”

“Ummm,” he said. “I’ve put the August roster on the notice board. It starts next Monday.”

“Did you do it?” asked Chris.

“Yes” said Henry, looking at him. “Keep it simple and don’t explain,” he thought to himself.

“Better not have me down for ovens again,” Chris said. “I’m sick of always doing the bleeding ovens.”

“I’m doing the ovens,” said Henry. “It’s only fair.”

“Cool,” said Chris. “I need a smoke. Can I go now?”

“Yes,” said Henry. He couldn’t think of anything else to say.

Jo finished the utensils she was washing and sauntered over to the notice board.

“Fuck,” she said. “You’ve got me down for afternoons, I can’t do afternoons, I gotta pick me bleeding kids up.”

“Several people have to pick up their kids,” said Henry. “I have to make the roster fair for everyone.”

Jo rounded on him, swearing like a trooper and demanding that he change the roster.

“I ain’t doing it,” she screamed. “I ain’t effing doing it!”

“KA MA’TE KA MA’TE KA’ORA KA’ORA” said Henry in his head

and just stared at her as he couldn't think of anything to say to Jo that might appease her, or not.

The others were watching closely to see what happened, except Chris who was happily smoking his ciggie and chatting with Layla who was skiving off from the Shipping Department.

Jo stared back at Henry then looked away. She stomped back to her sink and noisily put the utensils on their rack.

Several of the others gathered around the notice board. Henry heard a couple of OKs, a Cool, an “Ahh whatever” and “e's doing the ovens like 'e said”. Chris came back in.

“Don't you want to look at the roster?” Henry asked Chris.

“Couldn't give a stuff, Henry mate. Only me cat at home and she doesn't care what hours I do so long as I get her plenty of Feline Friskettes.” Chris grinned. He looked at Jo's back which radiated anger and laughed. He winked at Henry.

The others dispersed back to finish up and take their breaks and Henry went to the toilet and threw up. He sat on the toilet seat until his heart stopped pounding then rinsed his mouth and washed his face and hands. Going back into the kitchen he pulled an antiseptic wipe from the dispenser and wiped his hands. He went to the cold store and brought out two six pound saddles of lamb and started to cut them up for the lunches. Jo had disappeared.

She reappeared a few minutes later and grabbed her coat and bag from the rack beside the toilet door and stormed off, slamming the kitchen door behind her. Bryn appeared at his office door and beckoned to Henry.

“Now I'm going to get the sack,” said Henry sadly to himself as he wiped the knife and put it back on the knife rack. “Well, it was fun while it lasted. At least I've got my certificates.”

“Jo's quit,” said Bryn quietly.

A silence settled over the office.

“Oh dear,” said Henry. “Umm, should I go after her and try to persuade her to come back?”

“Fuck no,” said Bryn. “I’ve been trying to get rid of her since I got here. Well done boy!”

Henry was dumbstruck. He knew Jo was a bit of a troublemaker and was never happy with any of the jobs she was given as she felt they were beneath her but he hadn’t realised Bryn didn’t like her either.

“She’s worked in kitchens for donkeys years and thinks this place isn’t worthy of her talents but frankly she’s not much cop and I’ve never trusted her on the serious stuff. Neither did my predecessor and she resents it. She’s no great loss. We’ll pay her a fortnight in lieu but as far as I’m concerned that’s the end of it. HR can worry about it if they want to. More importantly, this means we can now take on another first year apprentice. I want you in on the interviews.”

Henry gaped. He wasn’t being sacked after all. He felt lightheaded and weak.

“Now I’ve had a look at your roster and there’s a couple of things I’d like you to explain to me.”

They whiled away a happy twenty minutes on the technicalities of rostering while Chris finished the saddles of lamb without being asked as lunch wasn’t that far away and a good stew needs time.

“So you’ve still got a job then?” smiled Julie when she got in the car to go home.

“Yes,” admitted Henry. “Although one of the women quit over my roster.”

“Yeah I heard. News travels fast in this hell hole.” Julie laughed. “What did Bryn say?”

“He was pleased. He said we’re going to take on another apprentice

chef in her place and he wants me in on the interviews.”

“That is so cool. He must trust you then. I know you'd do just fine.” Julie didn't see the need to tell Henry she'd been worried sick about him all day.

“Can we stop off at Shazza's on the way, she wants to tell me about her new boyfriend?”

Chapter Sixteen

Henry was woken by a strange and unusual noise and slowly opened his eyes. The room was dark but there seemed to be a green glow coming from the top of the chest of drawers on the other side of the room. The noise resolved itself into a depressingly happy tune with an underlying growl and as his consciousness increased he thought the irritant seemed to be coming from the general direction of the glow. Groaning he got up to investigate, his bare feet chilled after the warmth of the bed. Bleary eyed he reached out to touch the green glow and found it was a t-shirt. He picked it up, wondering why it was glowing and being uncharacteristically happy for a t-shirt. The glow stayed behind on the chest of drawers and turned to a yellowish white. The music and growling stopped but the glow resolved itself into a neat rectangle with writing on it. Squinting, half asleep, Henry was able to read “1 New Text Message” and, near the bottom, “Swipe Up To Unlock”. It was his phone. Someone had sent him a text message.

“Wha’?” thought Henry as one eye closed and the other drooped.

He picked up the phone and dropped the t-shirt and crawled back into bed.

“A text message?” thought Henry. “Why would Julie be texting me in the middle of the night?”

“What time is it anyway?”

He forced his eyes open and felt around in the bed clothes for his phone. Clutching it he swiped up and the display quivered but stayed the same. He stared at it then swiped down since the text on the screen was the wrong way up and the message appeared, upside down. It was from the library, politely informing him that his reserved book was now available. Henry looked at the time. 04:47.

“Great,” he thought, “I hope they don't expect me to come and get it right now.”

He went straight back to sleep.

He remembered the message when he was in the bathroom and made a mental note to go to collect it on Saturday. It was time he took back the others anyway. He'd studied the *How To Talk To Anyone* book at length and made copious notes in a cheap exercise book and had copied 83 of the recipes from *101 Classic Turkish Dishes* into his database of recipes. The book on Herbs had impressed him enough to buy his own copy online.

He was cooking breakfast when Denise came into the kitchen with the post. There was a letter for Henry which was a surprise as letters for him were rare. Even his credit card statements now came by email. Intrigued Henry tore open the envelope and read the letter.

"It's from the college," he said to Denise. "My second year will be on Thursdays instead of Wednesdays."

"That's probably what this one for Julie is then," yawned Denise, leaving it on the table where Julie normally sat.

Denise drank her first coffee of the day while Henry busied himself with bacon, scrambled eggs and some slices of beef, red wine and mushroom sausage he'd made a few days before. She wasn't a morning person. Julie came down twenty minutes later, made up but still in her dressing gown. Disinterestedly she opened her letter.

"Just the college," she announced to the world. "Confirming I'm still doing Wednesdays." She dropped the letter and concentrated on some sausage while looking at her phone.

"I've been moved to Thursdays," said Henry conversationally.

"That's nice," said Julie. She swiped her phone and reached for some of Henry's home made whole grain toast. "Oh shit!"

"What's the matter?" asked Denise.

"He's doing Thursdays!" said Julie, irritated. "That means he can't give me a lift to college anymore. Bugger."

She glared at Henry as though it was his fault.

“Or to work on Thursdays!” The full extent of the horror dawned on Julie. “That’s two days I’ll have to get the bus. And the damned bus to Bishopsford takes like forever!”

She pushed away her phone and started to brood, chewing halfheartedly on a piece of toast and black cherry jam.

“I can still take you to work before I go to college,” said Henry. He liked having Julie in the car with him. “And to college before work.”

“That wouldn’t work,” said Denise. “That would be four round trips every week which is a waste of time and money. Let the girl get the bus. It’ll probably only be for the first week anyway ’til she finds some other schmuck to drive her.” She laughed at her own witticism. Julie ignored them both.

“Shit,” she said to no one in particular and went back to her phone.

“I wonder why they changed my day,” said Henry.

“It’ll be because they’ve got limited kitchen space I would think and there’ll be a new intake of full timers,” said Denise, “whereas they’ve got plenty of classrooms so moving Julie’s classes around on the same day isn’t a problem.”

“I’ll probably have some early starts as well,” said Henry. “I’m working on September’s roster at the moment and it’s only fair I do some of the breakfast shifts too.”

“Oh shit,” said Denise. “I s’pose that means I’ll have to start doing them again.”

Mornings weren’t her best time and this one was shaping up unusually badly.

“Don’t look at me,” said Julie, looking up. “I can’t cook. Start having cereal instead.”

“I could always do your breakfasts before I go to work,” said Henry helpfully. “We could get a Bain-Marie to keep it all hot until you’re

up.”

Denise cheered up at this then she realised what time Henry would have to get up in order to do their breakfasts before going to work to do everyone elses.

“No, that wouldn't work,” she said sadly. “I suppose we'll just have to get used to it. Bugger.”

“I'm going to the library today,” announced Henry the following Saturday. “Anyone want anything in town?”

“I'll come with you,” said Julie. “I need to get some L plates.”

“What for?” said Denise. “Surely you're not expecting me to teach you to drive again?”

“It's OK mum, Henry will,” said Julie with a beaming smile at Henry.

Henry was taken aback. He always drove Julie wherever she wanted to go and, apart from that one time after the nightclub when he'd had too much to drink, Julie had never even hinted at driving herself.

“I'm happy to,” he said. “Although I've never taught anyone to drive before.”

“It's OK sweetie,” said Julie. “I know how to drive, I just need some practice before the test.”

Denise put down her coffee mug. “You're actually going to take the driving test? Get a licence? Good god, what's brought this on?”

Denise had taught Julie to drive when she was 17 but she'd never shown any inclination towards actually taking the driving test and getting a licence.

“I've been thinking about it and I know some guys who'll drive me to college and work but I reckon if they do it regularly they might get the wrong idea. Anyway, Jamie wouldn't like it.”

“Henry does,” said Denise.

“Jamie knows Henry. He reckons other guys would try it on and maybe leave me stranded somewhere. Anyway he thinks it's time I got my licence since I'm 20 and he said he'd buy me a car when I do. That way I can go to Taunton without having to get the train.”

“You don't mind?” Denise asked Henry.

Henry came out of his daydream of giving Julie lessons.

“Oh no,” he said. “It'll be fun.”

“I've already booked the theory test,” said Julie. “It's in three weeks. The week before college starts again, so I need to get the highway code thingy to learn it. They won't let me book the actual driving test until after I've passed the theory. So Henry can give me lots of practice and I'll take it as soon as I can after.”

“What car is he going to get you?” asked Denise. “Not some dangerous sports car I hope.”

“He said he'd see if he could get me a Viking but he was joking, I think.”

“What's a Viking?” asked Henry.

“It's the armoured vehicle the marines use. It's amphibious and wayyyyyyy cool. They've got tracks instead of wheels. I could so see me turning up for the driving test in one. I went for a drive in one on the Queen's birthday. It was awesome. It can drive completely underwater.”

“Armour would be useful, I know how you drive. Could he get you one in pink?” asked Denise.

Julie made a face at her. “They only come in jungle or desert camouflage although I could probably get it resprayed.”

“Just as long as it doesn't have a gun, Blossom.”

“That would be like sooooo cooooool.” Julie grinned and pretended to shoot other vehicles. “Get out of my way bastard! Boom, Boom.” She laughed happily. “And I’d never have a problem parking.”

As usual, Henry parked his Toyota in the mall car park.

“I’m going to find some L plates and a highway code book,” said Julie. “And I want to find a new outfit for my driving test so if I’m not in the cafe when you’re done at the library I’ll be either at GetIt or Sussanes, OK?”

Henry knew he’d have to text her to find out where she actually was when he was done. From experience he knew she was unlikely to be where she said she’d be. When it came to clothes there was always going to be something better at another shop.

“OK,” he said. “See you in a bit.”

“Umm, where would I get the highway code?”

“Try a newsagent,” said Henry. “They might have L plates too. If not we’ll get some at the auto accessories place in Brougham Street.”

“Cool, I’ll leave them to you then,” and she headed off in the direction of Sussanes.

Henry headed to the library and got a highway code from the newsagent on the way although they didn’t have any L plates. He pushed his books into the Returns Chute and headed for the Enquiries Desk. Carol was on duty again. Henry was pleased.

“Hello again,” said Carol, smiling at him.

Henry remembered the “there you are, here I am” bit from the book he’d just returned.

“Ahh, there you are,” he said with a smile.

Carol looked puzzled. “Were you looking for me?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Henry. “You were so nice and helpful last time.”

Carol's face cleared and she smiled even more brightly.

“Only for my special customers, Henry,” she said encouragingly.

Henry ran out of repartee at that point.

“I've come for my book,” he blurted out, holding up his phone with the text message about the reserved book on display.

“How To Make Friends And Influence People,” said Carol without looking at the phone. “It's on the Hold shelf. Let me show you.”

She held out her hand in a 'this way' gesture then touched Henry's elbow when he didn't move. He started and meekly followed her.

“I haven't seen you here since, well since the last time,” said Carol.

“I've been reading the books I got,” said Henry. “They were very interesting.”

“Are you learning how to talk to people?” asked Carol.

“I'm trying to,” said Henry sheepishly. “I'm not very good at it.”

“You seem to be managing just fine with me,” said Carol.

“It's girls,” Henry said. “I can't talk to girls.”

“Oh really? Well that's done wonders for my self esteem,” said Carol with a laugh. “What the hell does he think I am then?” she asked herself. “Oh well, at least it sounds like he's not married.”

“Here we are. The reserved books are in order of the borrowers' names,” she said. “Here's yours, under C for Curshaw.”

“How did you know my name?” asked Henry, curiously.

“I know which book you reserved,” said Carol. She actually

remembered his name from when she'd processed his new membership card. She handed him the book.

"I hope this one helps you talk to girls even better," she said, half raising an eyebrow at him and with a slight emphasis on 'girls'.

"So do I," said Henry. "Gosh she's helpful and understanding" he thought to himself. "I'd like to meet a girl just like her one day."

"I want to get some more cookery books," he said. "So thank you very much for your help, Carol."

He smiled and started to walk away. Then he turned back, looking a little embarrassed. Carol wondered what was coming next.

"Surely he's not going to ask me out so soon?" she thought "That would be out of character. Maybe in another year or two, if I'm still here."

"Umm, I was wondering, errr, ummm" stuttered Henry.

"He **is** going to ask me out," thought Carol, "maybe I misjudged him."

"Err, have you any books on relationships?" he said quickly.

"Bummer," thought Carol.

"Definitely," she said brightly. "Let me just check the computer to see which section they'll be in."

"A guy who's into relationships? This one is definitely worth waiting for," she thought to herself. "And it's unlikely anyone else will catch him anytime soon. Just give it time."

An hour later Henry left the library with his new books to read. He checked the library cafe and Julie was not there. He pulled out his phone and texted her while standing on the pavement outside the library building. Ten minutes later he got a text saying she was at Freida's Fashions in the High Street. He went over to meet her there.

She was going through a pile of long, fluffy socks when Henry arrived.

“Oh, there you are,” she said when she saw him. “I haven't been able to find a thing.”

She picked up her three bags, each from a different shop, and led the way to the exit.

“I got you a highway code,” said Henry, pulling it out of his pocket and passing it to her.

“Oh cool, thanks, sweetie,” she said stuffing it into one of her bags. “Did you find any L plates?”

“No, we'll get some on the way home.”

Back at the car Henry quickly dumped his library books on the back seat, hoping Julie wouldn't ask about them. The pile fell over and the cover of Good Sex Great Relationships emerged from the middle of the pile. Julie got in the passenger seat.

“Get any good books?” she asked.

“Just the one on Winning Friends and some more cooking books,” said Henry. “The one on Malaysian cooking looks very interesting.”

“Cool,” she said and pulled out her phone.

Henry went to his room as soon as they got back.

“Henry got a dirty book from the library, mum,” said Julie while he was upstairs.

Denise stopped what she was doing. “What do you mean a dirty book?”

“I didn't see the title but it's about sex. I saw the cover. And it definitely isn't gay sex either,” she laughed.

“Well if it's from the library it won't be porn. Maybe he's got a book

on what to do when he does get a girlfriend,” said Denise thoughtfully.

“Going by the picture he’ll have a pretty good idea when that time comes,” said Julie. “He’s probably up there hiding it under the mattress right now. He didn’t mention it when he told me what books he got.”

“I hope he doesn’t find it off-putting,” said Denise. “We want to motivate him to talk to girls, not scare him even more.” She sighed. She’d talked to Allan about having a birds and bees chat with Henry and he’d refused point blank. She had no intention of doing it herself. Your own kids are one thing but a 25 year old man?

“I think it’s definite progress,” she said a little later. “Maybe he’s talking to girls and we don’t know about it.”

“I s’pose,” said Julie. “He’s bound to have seen quite a few in the canteen although I haven’t heard any gossip. You don’t suppose he’s seeing anyone on the sly, do you?”

“No I doubt it. If he’s not here or at work he’s in his car with you. When would he fit in seeing someone else?”

“I’m sure his behaviour would change too. He’s just too open, he’d never be able to hide something like that,” said Julie.

Up in his room, Henry stared at Good Sex Great Relationships. He’d picked it up out of curiosity and had gone red when he saw the cover. He’d checked no one was watching him before quickly leafing through it. He hadn’t realised that relationships involved so little clothing. Clearly he had a lot to learn still. He’d picked up another book at random to hide the covers before he went to the cookery section and replaced it on the shelf later. Fortunately he could borrow the books through the computer and didn’t have to face Carol. Henry was also fairly sure Julie hadn’t noticed when the books fell over in the car, it would have been too embarrassing if she had. After all, Julie liked clothes too much to have any sort of relationship with someone without clothes. He pushed the book under his mattress before going back downstairs. It would be best to look at it later when Julie and Denise were out.

The next day Henry checked with his insurance company about having a learner driver on his policy and tied the L plates to his car when they said it wasn't a problem as he was now 25. He handed Julie the keys and showed her where the controls were.

Julie started the engine and slipped the car into first gear. It jumped and stalled.

“Oops,” she said with a giggle. “I forgot the clutch. Your old car was an automatic.”

She tried again and the car jumped forward unsteadily but kept going and Julie indicated and pulled out into the centre of the road. She changed gear, growing in confidence. At the roundabout, she braked a bit too hard and stalled again.

“No probs,” she said. “Let's try that again.”

She went left at the roundabout and drove down to the next roundabout, went all the way round and drove back to the first roundabout.

“Cool.”

She followed the same route again, this time accelerating more and managing to get into top gear before having to slow for the roundabout.

“No sweat. Let's go into town.”

Henry swallowed nervously but agreed. This time Julie turned right at the roundabout and headed into town. There was some traffic but it was fairly quiet being a Sunday and she kept her distance from the car in front.

“Met any nice girls in the canteen?” she asked Henry casually.

“Not really,” he said seriously. “There are lots of nice girls but they sit together and take no notice of me.”

Julie nodded, her eyes on the road. That was more or less the answer she'd expected.

"Let's go to the mall," she said and abruptly turned left into the car park, remembering to indicate afterwards. She found a vacant parking spot and pulled into it, leaving the wheels on one side over the dividing line.

"There's hardly anyone here," she said when Henry pointed this out to her. "Come on."

She got out of the car and waited for Henry then locked it and put the keys in her bag. In the mall Henry had a hot chocolate while he listened to Julie explain to a couple of her friends that Henry was teaching her to drive and the three of them discussed the joys of driving, where to go driving, what to drive and who to go driving with in a fair amount of detail.

Back in the car park, Julie was unlocking the car when a middle aged man came over.

"You're supposed to park between the lines," he pointed out.

Julie smiled prettily at him and said "Oh, thank you. I wondered what they were for!"

The man smiled back and told her she was welcome.

"That's how you make friends and influence people, Henry," she said with a laugh. "It helps to be blonde though."

She drove home fairly competently. Henry let her drive to and from work and on the occasional outing until the day of her theory test. Julie drove to the test centre, of course.

"Have you thoroughly studied the highway code?" Henry asked. He'd spent hours memorising it from cover to cover before his theory test.

"I read it through last night," said Julie. "Seems pretty straightforward. I'm a bit worried about the hazard perception test though. I've no idea

what it's like.”

“It's pretty easy,” said Henry. “You have to watch a three minute video and every time you think there's something dangerous going to happen you click the mouse. The earlier you click the more points you get.”

“Hope you're right,” said Julie. “I don't want to waste time having to retake it.”

Henry waited in the car while Julie took her theory test. There was a delay of some sort and she wasn't able to start the test at the appointed time so it was well over an hour before she came back out.

“How did you go?” said Henry. He'd been nervously worrying all the time she'd been gone.

“Aced it,” said Julie. “I got 48 out of 50 for the theory and 59 out of 75 for the video. Cool. You drive home, I want to book the driving test.”

She got in the car and pulled out her phone.

Chapter Seventeen

“Hello! Nice to see a friendly face!” said Carol.

It was the second Thursday of the new college year and Henry had finished his lunch in the college cafeteria and was wondering whether to go to the library or to go back to the classroom and prepare for the afternoon session. He looked up. Carol was standing in front of his table carrying a tray.

“Hello,” said Henry with a smile. It was nice to see a friendly face.

“Can I join you?” asked Carol.

“Certainly,” said Henry.

Carol put her tray on the table and sat down facing Henry.

“So are you a student here too or are you on the staff?” she asked.

“I’m a student,” said Henry. “I’m doing my second year of catering.”

“That figures, since you’re dressed like one. Part time or full time?”

“Just Thursdays.”

“Awesome,” said Carol. “I’m here on Thursdays too.”

She started picking at her egg salad.

“What did Denise say?” thought Henry, “something about saying something that follows on from the other person’s reply.”

“What do you do on Fridays?” he asked.

“I work at the library,” said Carol, slightly puzzled. “Why would he ask about Fridays?” she wondered, “not that I’m doing anything if he wants to go out tomorrow.”

“Maybe asking about Fridays wasn’t what Denise meant,” thought

Henry.

“Sorry,” he said. “Silly question. Ummm.”

Carol looked at him expectantly. He toyed with a spoon trying to think of something that followed on from 'I'm here on Thursdays too'.

Aha!

“So you're a student here, too?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Carol.

“Ummm,” said Henry.

Carol looked at him expectantly. She was beginning to find this quite funny. She made a small prompting gesture with her hand.

“What are you studying?” asked Henry. Now he'd thought of it, it seemed to be the obvious question to ask.

Carol let out a breath. She hadn't realise she'd been holding it waiting for Henry to think of something obvious to say.

“I'm doing a Graduate Diploma in Library and Information Services,” said Carol. “The library is paying for the course and giving me time off.”

She waited to see if Henry would think of the next obvious question.

“It's two years,” she said when he didn't.

“OK,” thought Carol. “Shall I help him out or not?”

“Is your work sending you here or are you doing it yourself?” she asked, deciding to help him.

“I work at Ashton-Mole,” said Henry. “They're paying for me.”

“I applied for a job there once,” said Carol. “Didn't get it, obviously.”

Henry nodded. "Ummm," he said.

"No job in particular," answered Carol. "I just wrote asking if there was anything they had that fitted my qualifications."

"Ahh," said Henry. He thought of something to ask.

"What are your qualifications?"

Carol looked pleased so he'd obviously asked the right question.

"I've a degree in Art," said Carol, delighted Henry was finally thinking of something to say even if it was a bit stilted, like a job interview.

"About the only thing I learned on that degree was that there's no work for artists unless you do graphic art for marketing or something. Which is so not me."

"What is you then?" asked Henry wildly, picking up on the last part of her answer.

"Good question," thought Carol. "He's quite perceptive."

"Difficult to say, I guess I'm kind of in a transition," she replied. "At the time I was kinda strongly anti-corporate, anti-commercial, you know?"

Henry nodded, looking serious. He didn't have a clue what she meant.

"So after looking for some way to make some money painting I gave up and went back to uni and did a masters in Art History."

"Did that give you any money?"

"Hmm, he's not a fool, that's for sure," thought Carol.

"Not much but I got a grant which was better than working for the man."

"Which man is that?" asked Henry, getting confused.

“You know, the system, the corporations.”

“Ahh” said Henry. “So you're an artist then.” The fact that she'd studied Art had just percolated through.

“Yes,” she smiled happily, holding up her hands for him to see. They had half erased paint smudges on them. “I was up half the night working on a canvas.”

“Great,” said Henry.

“I wonder if there are different styles of painting like there are cooking?” he thought.

“What style ...” he started to ask.

“Abstract surrealism,” she answered instantly. “Like Dali meets Pollock.”

“I have no idea what that means,” said Henry.

“You must come round to my place sometime and I'll show you some of my paintings,” said Carol.

“I wouldn't understand them,” said Henry.

“Maybe I was too quick to invite him round?” thought Carol. “That almost sounded like a 'No thanks'. Maybe I scared him.”

“That's where people go wrong with Art,” said Carol. “They try to understand it intellectually when they should really feel it emotionally.”

“I don't understand,” said Henry.

“OK,” said Carol. She thought for a moment. “When you cook something nice do you want people to discuss why you did it or just enjoy eating it?”

“Oh enjoy it of course. What's the point otherwise?”

“Exactly. Same with my paintings. I want people to enjoy them not argue about what I meant when I painted it.”

Henry nodded again.

“Yes, that makes sense.”

“So are you married?” asked Carol. She wanted to get this point cleared up.

“Oh lord no,” said Henry. He was a little disorientated because that question didn't seem to follow on from what they were talking about. Maybe Carol didn't know the rules of conversation?

“Only you were looking for a book on relationships. So I wondered if you were in a relationship,” said Carol. “Maybe a girlfriend?”

“No,” said Henry. “Have you?”

“I'm not into girls,” laughed Carol. “That was a joke” she added, seeing Henry's puzzled look.

“I was living with a guy when I did my MA but I dumped him because he was basically a useless, lying, scrounging no hoper. I like guys with a bit of ambition, a goal.”

“Oh,” said Henry. He couldn't think of anything to follow this up with.

“Yeah, I know, bit of a conversation killer isn't it,” said Carol, pushing away her half uneaten salad and picking up her orange. “So you're at Ashton-Mole. As a chef?”

“I'm studying to be a chef,” said Henry. “Although I'm a cook.”

“Right,” said Carol. “What's the difference?”

“Chef's are qualified,” said Henry, “cooks aren't.”

“This is your second year?”

“Yes.”

“And you've passed all your first year units?”

“Yes.”

“So you're qualified then. That means you're a chef.” Carol smiled brightly.

“Umm, I guess so. Although my job title is Deputy Head Cook.”

“How long have you been working there?”

I've been with Ashton-Mole for five years although I was in accounts for four. Then I moved to the canteen as a trainee cook.”

“So you've gone from being a trainee cook to Deputy Head Cook in a year? Wow, I'm impressed! You must be very ambitious.”

“Being a Junior Accounts Clerk was just so not me.” Henry thought he'd try out Carol's expression. It had a nice ring to it.

“I get you,” said Carol.

* * *

“They're running a cooking competition at college,” said Henry over dinner that night.

Denise looked expectantly at him. He carried on eating, oblivious.

“What sort of competition?” she asked eventually.

“It's only for students who've passed at least one of the speciality units,” said Henry and forked another mouthful into his mouth.

“Sometimes it's like getting blood out of a stone,” thought Denise.

“So is it just in the college or is anyone outside allowed to enter? And is there a prize or something?” she asked.

"I don't really know," said Henry. "I wasn't really listening."

"You've passed a speciality unit haven't you? Are you going to enter?"

"I don't think so. Competitions are so not me."

Julie and Denise looked at him in surprise. He sounded almost cool all of a sudden, where had that come from?

"Come on, Henry, surely you could enter a cake or something."

"I guess. But what if the judges don't like it?"

Denise laughed. "Well that's the risk you take in a competition. Anyway, does anyone at college bake better cakes than you? The ones you do for us are superb."

"I don't know about the full time people."

"You ought to enter something," said Julie. "The worst that can happen is that you lose and you'll be no worse off than you are now and you could win and that'll impress Bryn and look good on your resume."

"I'll think about it. I'd much rather people enjoy eating what I cook than think about why I did it."

"Why would anyone think about why you baked a cake?" said Denise in surprise.

"Oh, I don't know," said Henry vaguely.

Denise and Julie looked at each other. Henry cleared away the dishes and brought out an apple pie he'd made for the sheer fun of making pastry.

"What does 'I get you' mean?" asked Henry, dishing out the apple pie.

"It means you understand what the other person means," said Julie. "Have we got any ice cream? Why?"

"I was talking to the lady from the library at lunch today about jobs and I said working in accounts wasn't me and she said 'I get you'," explained Henry.

"I wouldn't have thought the women in the college library were your type, Henry," said Julie. "They're all in their sixties. "

"No, this was Carol from the public library. She's a student there too."

Denise and Julie exchanged a look. Bingo! Forget the ice cream.

"How old is she?" asked Julie.

"I don't know," said Henry. "She didn't tell me."

"Roughly," said Denise, slightly exasperated. "Old, young, married with kids?"

"Oh around my age I guess," said Henry. "The library is giving her time off to do library studies at the college. I don't think she's married."

He thought back over the conversation.

"Well she said she'd been living with someone at university but she dumped him, which I guess means she's not married."

"So she's got a degree?" asked Denise. "What in?"

"Art," said Henry. "And a masters in Art History. She got a job at the library as an assistant after she left uni."

"What's she like?" asked Julie. "Is she some weirdo arty farty type?"

"She very nice," said Henry. "And helpful. She's been helping me find books at the library."

Denise and Julie both wondered if Carol had chosen Good Sex Great Relationships for Henry.

“Did she ch ...” started Julie then changed her mind and went silent.

Denise mentally ran through the questions she'd normally ask in this sort of situation, such as 'are you going out with her?' and 'when are we going to meet her?' and decided not to ask any of them. They'd probably scare Henry. This needed to be nurtured.

“So, er, did you recognise her at college and go up to talk to her?” Denise asked instead.

“No she came up to me,” said Henry.

“Excellent,” thought Denise. Henry needs a girl who isn't shy.

“So how did it go?” asked Julie. “Talking to her I mean.”

“It went quite well. I tried out what Denise said. About asking something based on what she'd said.”

“How did that go?”

“It seemed to go OK. Although I got confused when she asked me if I was married since it didn't follow on from anything.”

“Yes!” exclaimed Denise in her head, wanting to slap hands with Julie. They both knew exactly what that meant.

“So that's when she told you she'd dumped that other guy?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Henry. “And she invited me round to look at her paintings.”

“So does she do, like, nudes and stuff?” asked Julie innocently.

“She said she did abstract surrealism,” said Henry. “I've no idea what that means though.”

“Well surrealism is when you take something real and distort it and abstract is when you don't try to make it real in the first place so I don't know what it is either,” said Denise. “Are you going to go see

them?"

"I don't know," said Henry. "I guess, if she invites me again."

"I'm sure she will," said Denise firmly.

Just after the mid term break Henry was summonsed to the Head of Catering's office again.

"It had better not be about my hat again," thought Henry. "That would be silly."

"Are you waiting to see me?" said John Davis when he saw Henry waiting outside his office at the lunch break.

"I was told you wanted to see me," said Henry. He was a little impatient as he wanted to go and talk to Carol in the cafeteria.

"Ahh," said John, "who are you?"

"Henry Curshaw," said Henry. "Is it about my hat?"

"What hat?" said John in puzzlement. "Have you lost a hat or something? Ahh, here we are. No, it's about the competition."

Henry sat silently. He needed more clues to be able to get involved in a conversation.

"You haven't entered yet," said John. "The closing date is this Friday, which is tomorrow. I just wanted to be sure you're going to get your name in in time."

"I'm not going to enter," said Henry. "Competitions are so not me."

John smiled. "I know what you mean," he said. "I was the same at your age. Cooking is about the pleasure of creating something delicious for people to eat and appreciate, isn't it."

Henry was pleased. The Head of Catering understood.

“But have you considered any other aspects?” continued John. “Such as the pleasure people can get from eating something prepared by a prize winning chef?”

Henry had to admit he hadn't considered that aspect.

“Or the prestige that comes from winning? Both for you and for the college?”

Henry had to admit he hadn't considered that aspect either.

“How does the college get any prestige out of it?”

John looked puzzled.

“Don't you know what the competition is about?” he asked.

“It's about cooking something nice, isn't it.”

“Oh my boy, my boy,” chortled John. “No, that's not it at all.”

He leaned back in his office reclining chair and steeped his fingers.

“No,” he continued. “The first round is just inside the college, of course, but the winner will go on to represent the college at the County Championships. We haven't had anyone get into the top three at the county level for, ohh, six years now and we've never won it.”

He abruptly got up and came round his desk to sit uncomfortably on the edge of it, almost touching Henry.

“Now I've been talking to Elaine, who took you for Cakes, Pastries and Breads and she tells me you have an original and inventive approach to pies and so on. She was very impressed. And Bernard said he'd was delighted with your interpretation of Provençal Vegetable Soup in Stocks, Sauces and Soups.”

He twisted to get a sheet of paper from his desk.

“Now,” he continued, “I see you're doing Seafood at the moment and

you'll have Desserts finished by the time of the County Championship. Excellent, my boy excellent! We expect great things from you."

He beamed at Henry and tried to clap him on the shoulder but the angle he was sitting at made it very awkward.

"So, for your own sake and for the sake of the college you will get your entry in, won't you."

He had a sudden thought.

"Your employer will appreciate it too. Where do you work?"

"Ashton-Mole."

"Ahh yes Ashton-Mole, we get a number of engineering students from them. Now, just imagine what will happen if their own chef wins the championships, eh. Word will get around and Ashton-Mole will get the best applicants for any jobs going. Everyone wants to have a good lunch, especially one prepared by a prize winning chef! Just imagine how delighted Ashton-Mole will be! They'll almost certainly give you a pay rise."

He gazed thoughtfully at Henry, as though willing him to enter the competition.

"So I can expect your entry to be in by Friday?" he said.

"OK," said Henry.

"Excellent," said John. "Now I've taken the liberty of filling out the entry form for you." He slid another piece of paper across the desk. "All you have to do is sign it."

Henry signed it.

"Good lad," said John. He beamed as he walked Henry to the door. "No pressure mind, but I expect you to win for us."

* * *

“Cool,” said Carol when he told her when he finally arrived in the cafeteria. “The Head of Catering wants you to enter the competition and represent the college at the County Championships. I’m impressed. When are you going to cook something for me so I can see just how good a chef you are?”

“Umm,” said Henry. This wasn’t the reaction he’d expected. He’d rather thought she’d try to talk him out of it since it was symbolic of capitalistic commercialism.

“What is wrong with him?” thought Carol. “I’ve been hinting for weeks and now I’m practically begging him to take me out and he never does. Maybe I’m wasting my time here? It can’t just be shyness, maybe he doesn’t like me after all.”

“Umm,” said Henry again. “Well, when would you like me to cook something for you?”

“How about over the weekend?” said Carol in delight. “Progress at last,” she thought.

“Maybe you can come over to my place and I can show you some of my work at the same time. My kitchen’s not up to much but it’s got all the basics.”

“OK,” said Henry. “That’ll be fun. What sort of things do you like to eat?”

“Oh, I’ll eat anything,” laughed Carol, “even if I hate it” she thought.

“It’d be nice to see you out of your chef’s uniform,” she went on happily. “I’ve almost forgotten what you look like in normal clothes. And you’re such a smart dresser! Where do you get your clothes?”

“Oh, Julie gets them for me.”

“Who the fuck is Julie???” thought Carol.

“Who is Julie?” asked Carol quietly.

“I live with her,” said Henry.

Chapter Eighteen

“So what's your strategy going to be?” asked Denise that evening.

“Strategy for what?” asked Henry.

“For winning the college competition, of course,” said Denise. “Surely you've thought about it?”

Henry hadn't given it a single thought. He was a little puzzled over why Carol had abruptly got up and left the cafeteria without sorting out which day he was going to come over and cook for her, although what to cook for her was an even bigger puzzle since he had no idea what equipment she had or really what her tastes were but the competition hadn't crossed his mind. Carol usually just had a salad in the cafeteria, which wasn't much to go on.

“No, not really,” he answered.

“Oh Henry,” said Denise sorrowfully. “How do you expect to win if you don't put any effort in?”

“I think they just make a decision based on the unit assignments,” said Henry. “And John, the Head of Catering had put Seafood down as my competition entry unit so it'll be whatever the Seafood assignments are.”

“Do you have any choice in your assignments?” asked Julie. “Or do you have to prepare whatever they specify?”

“Both,” answered Henry. “The final assignment of the cooking units always involves preparing two things. One is what they say and it has to be as close as possible to standard and the other is whatever you want although they like it to be something not covered on the course. Something you've made up or found out about independently. Like with Stocks, Sauces and Soups we had to do either Béarnaise Sauce or Agrodolce but we could choose our own soup.”

“Have we had Agrodolce?” asked Julie. “I don't think I remember it.”

“Oh lord no,” said Henry. “It’s a traditional Italian sweet and sour sauce that’s mostly sugar and you try to avoid sugar so I did the Béarnaise.”

“So what you’re saying is that for the competition you can do something standard and something amazing as well?” said Denise, reluctant to let strategy go away.

“Yes,” said Henry.

“What about at the County Championship?” asked Denise. “They won’t have assignments for that.”

“I don’t know,” said Henry. “I think it’s being held in Guildford but I don’t know when or anything else about it. I’ll worry about that when the time comes. I don’t expect I’ll win the college one anyway.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Bryn the next day. “You’re virtually guaranteed to win, that Head of Catering told you so, more or less.

“What do you mean?” asked Henry. “All he did was ask if I had entered.”

“You can be totally clueless sometimes, Henry,” said Bryn shaking his head. “Why do you think the Head of bloody Catering would give a stuff who entered?”

“I don’t know,” confessed Henry. “Maybe no one else has entered.”

“I’m only clueless because no one ever explains things to me,” he thought sadly.

Bryn sighed and leaned forward.

“Do you think he would give a flying fuck about some poxy little competition if it was only within the college?” he demanded. “Of course he fucking wouldn’t. There’s only one reason he’s got his knickers in a knot and that the chance of winning some prestige for him and his department at the County level. If one of his students wins at County then he’ll probably get more bleeding students

enrolling and that means more fucking funding for his precious department.”

“Oh,” said Henry. “I must be clueless,” he thought sadly, “since that never occurred to me.”

“So why would he tell you to enter then?” asked Bryn.

“Umm, he's trying to make up for telling me off last year about my hat?” ventured Henry.

“Iesu mawr!” exclaimed Bryn in Welsh, throwing down his pen. “It's because he expects you to win at County, for crying out loud. And the only way you can win at County is to win at the college, so unless you really stuff it up you're going to Guildford.”

“What if someone else does better than me?” protested Henry. “That would mean they'd win, not me.”

Bryn raised his eyes to the ceiling. “It's possible someone else might pull something wonderful out of the hat,” he said. “But the college will still send you because you're consistently good. Someone who's been pretty naff all year and suddenly turns out something awesome isn't going to be reliable enough to risk but you are. That's why he was so worried you might not be entering. Get used to it Henry, you've already won the college competition and the entries haven't even closed yet!”

“That doesn't seem very fair though,” said Henry.

“Life's not fair, Henry. Get used to it.”

Henry sat for a few moments then nodded. He got up to leave.

“Actually it's wrong of me to say that,” said Bryn. “I sound like I'm saying the competition's been fixed and I shouldn't say that. It would be fairer to say that the winner will be the person who's been consistently good throughout the entire course rather than someone who just happened to turn out something nice on the day. Isn't that fairer? After all, you're a damned good chef and you've worked bloody

hard considering you couldn't cook a piece of fucking toast when you started. You should be bloody proud of yourself being the college champion, just as I am. Now get off and get the lunches sorted. I've got things to do."

Bryn gazed reflectively after Henry.

"I just hope he's got the guts for the County Championship and doesn't crack under the pressure like I did," he thought to himself.

* * *

"I'm worried about Henry," said Denise, while Henry was at the library.

"Why's that?" asked Allan. He'd been thinking Henry had been more withdrawn than usual but he didn't really think about Henry all that much. He spent more of his time thinking about Denise.

Julie glanced up from her phone to see what Denise would say.

"He seems to be getting more withdrawn," said Denise. "He was becoming almost talkative but he's going quiet again."

"I've noticed that too," said Julie. "He spends a lot more time gazing into space as well and just pretending to look at his cooking books."

"Do you think it's the cooking competition that's worrying him?" asked Denise. "After all, it's the end of term next week and the results will be announced on Thursday."

"I wouldn't think so," said Allan. "After all, Bryn seemed to think it was pretty much a certainty. Henry did get his assignment in, didn't he?"

"Yes, he took them in last Thursday. He was going to do the final touches in the college. Maybe something else is bothering him? Do you suppose he's worrying about the County Championship?"

"Have you noticed he hasn't mentioned Carol for a while?" said Julie

thoughtfully. "I was thinking about that a couple of days ago."

"He's never really talked about her though, has he?" said Denise.

"I guess not but he used to say something every now and then. And he was using some of the things she said too. Maybe he's not seeing her anymore?"

"Was he ever really seeing her?" asked Allan. "It's not like he ever went out with her is it."

"Maybe she gave up on him?" said Denise. "After all, a girl won't wait forever and you know how disinterested Henry can seem. I was pretty sure she liked him though and that he liked her."

"Well, hasn't he gone to the library to see her?" asked Allan.

"He went last Saturday and came back looking quite sad. Maybe she's left town and didn't tell him?" said Julie.

"Maybe it's the competition," said Denise. "or maybe something to do with Carol or maybe it's something else."

She looked at Julie then Allan.

"I think we're going to have to find out. I'm sure he needs our help and either doesn't realise it or is too scared to ask."

The front door opened then closed.

"Sounds like Henry's back," said Julie, putting down her phone.

"Do you want me to disappear somewhere?" asked Allan.

"Oh lord, do you think it'll be that bad?" asked Denise.

Henry's footsteps went up the stairs.

"Well you two have a much better relationship with him than I do," said Allan. "I think I'm more of a fatherly adviser whereas you two are

more motherly.”

“He older than me!” said Julie with a laugh. “I can’t be his mother.”

“You’ve a wise head on young shoulders,” said Allan. “You’ll be an awesome mother one day.”

There was a muffled flush from the toilet upstairs and Henry’s footsteps came down the stairs. He walked disconsolately into the lounge and sat in his armchair.

“How was the library?” asked Denise.

“Pretty quiet,” said Henry.

“Did you see Carol there?” asked Julie.

“She doesn’t do Saturdays anymore.”

“Oh why’s that?” asked Denise. Maybe the problem was Carol after all.

“I don’t know.”

“Didn’t she tell you she was changing her roster?”

“No.”

There was a short silence as everyone digested this snippet of information.

“So, ahh, when did you last talk to her?” asked Julie.

“Not for several weeks,” said Henry. He thought about it, ticking off his fingers.

“It was the day I told her that the Head of Catering wanted me to enter the cooking competition,” he said after a while.

There was a short silence as everyone digested this snippet of information as well.

“So she doesn't approve of competitions? Is that what you're saying?” said Allan, who preferred problems to be solvable on a spreadsheet.

“I don't know,” said Henry. “She just suddenly got up and walked out of the cafeteria. I haven't seen her since.”

“Oh god, what did you say?” said Julie, stopping pretending to play with her phone.

“I didn't say anything,” said Henry.

“Well, knowing you that's probably true,” said Denise. “Maybe she just got sick of the silence?”

“Well, we were talking,” Henry admitted. “But I didn't say anything nasty.” He glanced at Julie.

“Come on, tell us what you were talking about.” said Denise.

“It was a long time ago,” protested Henry, beginning to feel he was being interrogated like someone he'd seen in a war movie.

“Come on, Henry. You must have said something. People don't just get up and walk out and never talk to you again for no reason,” said Julie.

“Umm,” said Henry. In his experience this had actually been the norm.

“Well, I told her about the competition,” said Henry reluctantly. “And she asked me when I was going to cook for her.”

“You didn't refuse, did you?” said Julie, aghast.

“I asked her what she liked to eat and she said to go round to her place sometime and cook there and she'd show me her paintings,” said Henry.

“What did you say about her paintings?” asked Denise, knowing that Henry had done something to upset Carol. She could feel it in her blood.

"I didn't say anything about her paintings. I haven't seen them yet," said Henry.

"Any minute now they're going to start on my fingernails," he thought, "I bet that hurts."

"Go on," said Allan. "What happened next?"

"She said it would be nice to see me in my normal clothes," said Henry. "I always wear my cooking clothes at college you see," he added by way of explanation.

"And?"

"And she asked me where I got them," said Henry.

"So what did you say?"

"I told her Julie got them for me."

"Oh god," said Denise. Suddenly everything was becoming very clear. "Then what?"

"She asked me who Julie was."

Henry started to turn red because everyone was staring at him and he felt very self conscious.

"What did you say?" asked Allan when it became apparent no one else was going to ask.

"I told her I lived with Julie."

"You what?" said Denise. She couldn't believe her ears.

"You are fucking kidding me!" exclaimed Julie, staring at Henry in wide eyed shock.

"Oh god," said Allan, wishing he'd gone when he had the chance.

Henry looked around at them, red faced but clearly puzzled.

“But what's wrong with that? I do live with Julie.”

Denise recovered first.

“So I'm guessing after you said that Carol got up and left and you haven't seen her since,” she said.

“That's right,” said Henry, wondering why Julie was lying back on the couch with her arm over her eyes. “She said something about having to get back to class.”

Henry stared at the floor.

“She hasn't been back to the cafeteria. At least not when I've been there,” he said. “I know she's still at college though because after a couple of weeks I found out which room her class was in and I went and looked through the window and I could see her in the class. So last Saturday I went to the library to find out if she was OK and when she wanted me to go round and cook for her.”

He looked up. “I was thinking of doing a shrimp soufflé since she doesn't like heavy foods. Anyway, that's when I found out she isn't there on Saturdays anymore.”

“Why did you go today?”

“I thought she might have changed her mind.”

“Oh Henry,” sighed Denise. “What are we going to do with you?”

“Did I do something wrong?” asked Henry. He'd been worrying about Carol for weeks now. He'd thought she liked him but it seems she didn't after all.

Allan cleared his throat.

“The thing is, Henry,” he said slowly, “I rather think you gave Carol the idea you've been lying to her.”

"I've never lied to her!" exclaimed Henry. "Never!"

"I didn't say you lied to her," said Allen. "I said she may be thinking you did."

"Why would she think that?" cried Henry, jumping to his feet. "I always told her the truth!"

"Sit down Henry and listen to me," said Allan in his best father's voice. "When someone says they live with someone else it usually means that they are living like a married couple. You meant that you were staying at the same house that Julie does. I rather think Carol took it to mean that you were sort of married to Julie."

"What are you talking about? I'm not married to Julie! Why would she think that?" Henry turned white and started to shake.

"You said the wrong thing Henry," said Denise softly. Her heart was breaking. "Allan's right, you should have said you lodged with Julie, or even that you lodged with me and that Julie's my daughter, or something like that, but saying you lived with Julie would have given Carol the completely wrong idea."

"But why would she stop talking to me?" said Henry. He was puzzled, confused, upset and feeling guilty all at the same time.

"Because she liked you, you freaking idiot," shouted Julie, jumping up from the couch, red splotches on her cheeks. "That's why she wanted to know if you were married or had a girlfriend! She was checking you were available, you you ... ohhh!"

Julie stormed out of the room. Her anger was palpable.

Henry sat frozen in his chair, staring at the door that Julie had slammed behind her. His brain had ceased functioning. Julie was angry with him. Just like his dad. Denise was saying something but Henry couldn't hear it for the whooshing in his ears. Julie was angry with him. He slowly rose to his feet and looked blankly around him, his eyes blurred and unfocused.

"I think I'll erm, yes, go, erm," and he fled the room and ran up upstairs.

Denise and Allan looked at each other in silence.

"Well," said Allan, scratching behind his ear. "Looks like we're having a take-away for dinner."

Denise lost her temper too.

Up in his room, Henry lay curled up in a ball on his bed, fully clothed and shaking. Julie's angry with me, I'm so useless, just like dad said, not worth the time of day, I'm an idiot, oh god please don't let Julie hit me, she's angry with me, dad's angry with me, I'm such a loser, I can't get anything right. His mind neared overload with the confusion of thoughts and fears swirling around. He started to cry and pulled the covers over his head.

In her room next door Julie calmed down. She rarely lost her temper and when she did it never lasted long. She lay on her bed wishing she'd never met Henry. He was so inept and yet so vulnerable and sometimes so annoyingly stupid. She sighed.

"I'd better go and apologise to him for losing my temper," she thought. "If I don't he'll only follow me round like a hurt puppy for weeks."

She got up and knocked on his door. There was no reply so she opened it and was about to call his name when she heard him crying. She ran over to the bed and pulled back the bedclothes. Henry cowered back.

"Don't hit me, please don't hit me," he whimpered.

"Oh god, what have I done?" thought Julie.

"There now, there now, it's all right," she said soothingly.

"Should I get mum?" she thought.

"Come on sweetie, stop crying, no one's going to hit you, I won't let

them, I'm here to protect you, stop crying, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

She sat on the side of the bed and stroked Henry's head. Slowly his sobs subsided.

"Come on now, sit up, that's a good boy. There we go. Give me a hug now, that's it."

Henry clung to Julie for several minutes.

"If he'd had some hugs like this when he was a kid he wouldn't be like this now," thought Julie. "He's screaming out for human contact."

After a while Henry pulled himself together.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I hate it when people get angry with me. I get scared."

"I know sweetie, I know," said Julie softly. "I shouldn't have got angry with you. I'm sorry."

"I've been very stupid, haven't I," said Henry.

"You mean with Carol?" asked Julie. Henry nodded.

"This is the problem when dealing with other people," she said. "Things don't always mean what you think they mean and even when they do mean what you think they mean the other person doesn't always know that. It's silly really."

"I always told Carol the truth," said Henry. "I would never lie to her."

Julie brushed Henry's hair back.

"You liked her, didn't you," she said, "you really liked her."

"Yes," said Henry. "And I thought she liked me."

"That was the problem, sweetie," said Julie. "She actually did like you. That's why she stopped talking to you when she misunderstood what

you said. Just a sec.”

Julie had heard Denise's voice from downstairs. She went to the door.

“What was that, mum?”

“Allan's getting a take-away for dinner. What would you like? Pizza or Chinese?”

Julie turned to Henry. “Fancy a pizza, sweetie?” Henry nodded, he didn't really care since he wouldn't be able to eat anything.

“Pizzas please,” Julie shouted down to Denise. “Henry too. Is my phone down there?”

“I'm just going to get my phone,” Julie told Henry. “I'll be back in a moment. Hawaiian OK?”

Henry nodded indifferently. Julie went downstairs.

“Henry's really upset,” she told Denise. “I'm going to stay in tonight and sort him out. Ahh, there it is.” She grabbed her phone. “We'll both have Hawaiians. Make Henry's a Large, he's going to need the carbs. Thanks, Allan.”

Julie walked slowly upstairs, texting her friends to cancel their evening.

“Right Henry,” she said. “Let me explain why Carol did what she did.” She settled herself comfortably on the bed beside Henry, using both his pillows.

Several hours later Henry lay in his bed, stuffed with a large Hawaiian pizza, a single thought buzzed jerkily around his head like something out of a computer game.

“Carol liked me. Yes me, Henry. That's why she wanted to know if I was married, because she liked me. Cool.”

In the next room, Julie lay on her bed, stuffed with a small Hawaiian

pizza, a single thought buzzing round in her head.

“I’m not sure why or how but I’m the cause of all this. I guess that means I’m going to have to fix it. God knows how though. Henry doesn’t even have Carol’s phone number. Jesus, what am I going to do?”

Chapter Nineteen

“Ah hello, I wonder if I could speak to Carol?” said Julie.

“We have two Carols,” said the male voice over the phone. “Which one do you want?”

“Good question,” said Julie. “I don't know. Umm, the one who's about 25 years old.”

“That'll be Carol Delaney,” he said. “Carol Weston will be retiring next year. I'm afraid Carol Delaney isn't in today, she's part time. She's here Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Could you try again on one of those days or perhaps someone else could help you?” The voice was very polite but somewhat disinterested.

“Oh, thank you,” said Julie. “I'll try again another day. Bye.”

She hung up and made a note of Carol's name on a PostIt Note on her desk then leaned back thoughtfully.

“She's still there, great,” she thought, “That makes life a lot easier. I can skip college on Wednesday morning and have a talk with her. Sweet. Should I take Jamie too or go alone?”

It hadn't taken Julie long to realise that the only possible way forward was to talk to Carol. Whether or not it would achieve anything was another matter but that would resolve itself once contact had been made. The first problem had been to track Carol down so on Monday Julie phoned the library to see if she was still working there and if not, try to find out where she had gone.

Jamie had phoned over the weekend to say he'd be back on Tuesday for a couple of days leave. He only had three months left before his unit rotated again and he wanted to spend as much time as he could with Julie. At the next rotation his unit would move to six months of 'force generating' status, which was essentially intensive training, prior to rotation to active duty and that would be Jamie's last period of active duty. A couple of months previously, Jamie had been informed that at the end of his active service he would be promoted to Colour

Sergeant and take over the Commando training centre in Devon. He and Julie had decided that they would get married then and she would move to Devon with him, It was good timing as she'd have finished her Diploma in Supply Chain Management by then and she should be able to get a decent job until they decided to start a family. They hadn't yet passed on the news to Denise or his mother.

"We have a mission tomorrow," Julie said to Jamie mid-evening as they were lying in bed. She liked pretending to be Jamie's Commanding Officer at times although most of the time she liked Jamie being in command. It made her feel very safe and loved.

"Excellent, I'm looking forward to the de-briefing already," he replied, giving her a kiss. She moved his hand away, it was a distraction.

"You don't have much of a role," she said, "mainly support but I need you there to establish my credentials."

"Got it," said Jamie. "Hostile territory?"

"Potentially very hostile," she replied and briefed Jamie on the background and objectives of the mission.

"Uniform or civvies?" he asked. She pondered this for a few moments. Although Jamie looked very smart in his uniform, especially his formal full dress uniform, the effect might be too extreme. She didn't want Carol thinking that this was a planned drama hiding something else entirely.

"Civvies," she said, deciding. "But not your shorts. Jeans."

"Just as well," said Jamie "as I didn't bring any uniforms with me."

Julie hit him hard on the chest and Jamie pretended not to feel a thing.

"What are you wearing?" asked Jamie.

Julie had been thinking about this since Monday morning. She obviously wanted to come across well to Carol but equally didn't want

to be too sexy or threatening. She wanted Carol to see her as an ally rather than as a potential enemy. She'd more or less decided on neat and businesslike, which meant one of the outfits she normally wore to work.

"Sound decision. Where and when?" asked Jamie.

"Since we're looking for her cooperation it needs to be in territory where she feels safe and strong," said Julie. "But if things do turn hostile we need to be able to retreat quickly. So tactically the library itself would be ideal but if not then a cafe of her choice." She started drawing diagrams on Jamie's stomach with her finger. "And if we go to a cafe we need to sit somewhere with easy access. And lunchtime would be appropriate since this isn't going to be quick unless it all goes horribly wrong."

"Got it," said Jamie. "Summation. Preliminary approach at 11:30 hours giving time for variations in lunch routines subject to response by target. Reconnoitre proposed meeting site by 12:00 hours. Establishment of meeting site with avenues for strategic retreat if needed by 12:15 hours."

"Sounds good," said Julie. "Additional resources?"

"Cash," said Jamie. "Credit card payment introduces vulnerability."

Julie looked questioningly at him.

"If we have to retreat, paying by card will delay things," he said. "Cash can be left on the table."

"Good thinking, Sergeant," said Julie.

"Backup plan?" asked Jamie.

"I'll let you know when I think of one," said Julie. "But at the moment we need to work on troop moral."

She got off the bed and put on one of Jamie's old berets that he'd left there some time before.

“Time to inspect the troops,” she said, looking very serious despite being completely naked apart from the beret. “Atten-shun!”

Jamie leapt off the bed and stood rigidly to attention. Julie inspected him very thoroughly.

At 11:35 the next morning Julie led the way into the library with Jamie not far behind. The place was fairly quiet as it was a weekday and there didn't appear to be any staff around. They paused next to a display of books near the Enquiries desk to wait. Jamie picked up one of the books and read the back cover then flicked through it and snorted. He put the book down and picked up another. Julie was too nervous to look at the books. She checked her phone was in her pocket and put down her shoulder bag then picked it up again and checked her hair was still there then checked her phone again and glanced at Jamie. He was reading the cover of another book.

Someone came to the Enquiries Desk and reached for the keyboard. Julie nudged Jamie.

“Oh shit,” she muttered. “Let's go home.”

Jamie frowned at her. “Pre-combat anxiety,” he said. “Goes as soon as action begins. Move.”

He gently pushed her towards the Enquiries Desk. The girl looked over at Julie. She was about the same height but wasn't quite as slim and had short, dark unruly hair. She was dressed in a long, yellowish dress with some kind of abstract, almost Indian, motif and wore a plain white cardigan over the top.

“Excuse me,” said Julie brightly. “I'm looking for Carol Delaney.”

“That's me,” said Carol.

“Oh,” said Julie. She hadn't expected to find Carol at the first attempt. She paused.

“Umm, I'm a friend of Henry's,” she said.

“Oh yes,” said Carol. “Henry who?”

“Henry Curshaw, the chef,” said Julie. “I’m Julie.”

Carol glanced at her computer screen then realised who Julie was. She stiffened and looked challengingly at Julie.

“How can I help you?” she said and unconsciously took a half step backwards and kicked over a small metal bin. Flustered she bent to pick it up then turned back to Julie.

“I, err, wondered if we could have a chat with you about Henry,” said Julie, glancing at Jamie for support.

“Why would you want to do that?” said Carol. She glanced at Jamie too.

“There’s been a dreadful misunderstanding,” said Julie. “I’d really like to explain everything to you.”

“I don’t see that there’s anything to explain,” said Carol. “Now if you don’t mind I have work to do.”

“Please,” said Julie pleadingly. “It won’t take long.”

Carol glanced back at her then raised an eyebrow and returned her attention to the screen.

“I am Julie’s fiancée,” said Jamie, authoritatively. “When is your lunch period?”

Carol slowly turned back to face Julie and gave her a long, searching look then looked at Jamie. She raised her eyebrow again and gave a small sigh.

“OK,” she said. “12:45. I’ll meet you in the Sea Salt Cafe. Now if you’ll excuse me, I really must attend to this,” and she turned back to the computer.

Julie looked up at Jamie then back at Carol. “Right, 12:45 at the Sea

Salt Cafe. We'll see you there."

She hesitated and Jamie touched her elbow. "Come on," he said, "Carol's got work to do. Let's go."

Julie followed Jamie to the exit. Carol watched them go out of the corner of her eye then slumped into the chair as soon as they were out of sight.

"Oh sod," she said aloud, "what the hell am I going to do now?"

"Can you tell me where to find poetry?" asked an elderly lady coming up behind her. "Only I've been looking everywhere and can't find any."

"You can never find poetry in your life if you look for it," said Carol with a smile as she turned around. "You can only stumble upon it by accident. Come on, let's look for something else and maybe we'll stumble on some poetry along the way."

The elderly lady looked at her strangely. "I'm looking for T.S.Eliot's Cats book. You know, MacCavity's a mystery cat, he's called the hidden paw, that one."

Carol laughed. "Old Possum's Book Of Practical Cats" she said. "It's over here."

* * *

"Do you know where the Sea Salt Cafe is?" asked Jamie.

"No," said Julie, "I've never heard of it."

"Right," said Jamie. "Phase one complete, instigate phase two. Locate meeting place. Excuse me."

He stopped a passerby and asked where the Sea Salt Cafe was. She thought it might be around the corner. They went around the corner and found it wasn't there so Jamie asked another passerby.

“Ohh the Sea Salt Cafe, yes, didn't it used to be The Lunch Box? Or was it the Tinder Box? I forget. Oh yes, it's round the corner. On the other side of the road.”

They went back around the corner they'd just come around and found the cafe was opposite the library, a little further down.

“Observation skills deficiency,” said Jamie. “Better not let that happen again.”

They crossed the road and approached the cafe.

“External seating, good access” said Jamie. “No apparent other avenues of escape. Both sides occupied so no side exits. Best stay outside. Good site to observe approaches too.”

He sat firmly at a corner table, outside the cafe, and Julie sat beside him.

“What shall we do now?” she asked.

“ETA 58 minutes,” said Jamie, looking at his watch. “Let's eat. What would you like?”

Jamie went in to the cafe to order two toasted bacon and egg sandwiches and a pot of tea for himself and a glass of water for Julie.

“How do you think it went?” asked Julie when he came back.

“Too early to tell,” he replied. “Carol may not turn up.”

At 12:40 Jamie went back in and ordered two more toasted bacon and egg sandwiches, two pots of tea, a cheese salad and a glass of orange juice.

At 12:59 he finished the last of his sandwiches and glanced at his watch.

“Looks like she's not coming,” he said. “Shall I eat the salad?”

“Give her time,” said Julie. “It can't be easy coming to meet two strangers about an embarrassing situation you don't really want to talk about.” She poured herself another cup of tea.

“Ahh, here she comes,” said Jamie, a couple of minutes later. Carol was crossing the road. She was wearing an old and tatty army surplus greatcoat.

She slowly made her way to the cafe and saw them at the corner table. She hesitated then came over.

“I wasn't going to come,” she said, standing a long pace away. Jamie stood up and pulled out a chair for her. Carol didn't move.

“I'm so pleased you did,” said Julie with a welcoming smile. “Henry said you always ate salads at lunch and an orange so we got you ...” She gestured at the salad and orange juice.

“Can I have a coffee?” asked Carol.

“Coming right up,” said Jamie and disappeared inside the cafe.

Carol sat down.

“OK,” she said. “What's all this about?”

“Umm,” said Julie suddenly embarrassed and uncertain. “Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all,” she thought.

“Right,” she said decisively. “From what Henry's told me he told you several weeks ago he lived with me and you haven't spoken to him since.”

“What's it to do with you?” said Carol, more aggressively than she'd intended. “Oh god I wish this wasn't happening,” she thought.

“Well since I'm apparently living with Henry I think it's got a lot to do with me,” said Julie tartly.

Then she paused. “I'm sorry,” she said to Carol. “That was nasty of

me. I'm Henry's friend and I desperately want to help him and I want to be your friend too."

Carol heard the pleading in Julie's voice and her face softened. Jamie sat in his seat and picked up his tea cup.

"Coffee'll be here in a minute," he said. He glanced at Julie. "It's all paid for."

Julie took a deep breath.

"OK," she said to Carol. "There's something you need to understand about Henry."

Carol nodded. Even though it was probably too late she'd like to understand at least something about Henry as she'd found him very confusing. Guys were, in her experience, usually very easy to understand.

"Henry is very literal," said Julie. "Incredibly literal. He has absolutely no idea about nuance or subtleties or metaphors. So when he said that he lived with me he meant it literally, like we happen to both occupy the same house. He definitely didn't mean that he was living with me in a relationship."

Carol looked at her then looked at Jamie then back at Julie.

"He's really your fiancée?" she asked.

"He in the Royal Marines," said Julie. "We're getting married in fifteen months when he comes back off active service. Oh and his name's Jamie, I forgot to introduce you." She giggled.

"Hello, Carol," said Jamie, holding out his hand. "Nice to meet you."

Carol reached over and touched his hand just as a waitress arrived with her coffee and two more bacon and egg sandwiches.

"The sandwiches are for me," said Jamie, deftly pulling the plate from in front of Carol.

“He's had four already,” said Julie. “He's a greedy pig,” and she stroked his shaved head.

“It's because you wear me out,” said Jamie, his mouth half full of toasted bacon and egg.

Carol watched them then laughed.

“You are so not with Henry,” she said. “I can see that. OK, talk to me.”

Julie talked. She told Carol about how Henry had been thrown out of his parents' home and that he'd slept in his car and how her mother had taken him in as a lodger. She talked about how Henry had hated being in accounts and asked to move. She talked about how she'd gone with him to get his belongings from his parents and how they'd treated him.

Carol and Jamie sat silently until Jamie interrupted Julie.

“It's 14:00 hours. Do you need to go back to work?” He asked Carol.

“It's not a problem,” she said. “I work for the council, it's almost impossible to get sacked. Carry on.”

Julie told her about Icona Pop and how Henry had no idea about clothes and how much Henry loved cooking. She told him how Jamie had taught him the Haka and had got him to do some weight training. She talked about how little Henry knew about girls and sex and life generally and how he couldn't understand why Carol had stopped talking to him and how stupid and ashamed he felt when she'd explained it to him. Finally she ground to a halt.

“So, umm, it's none of my business what you do or don't do, Carol. I'm not trying to run your life or make you do anything. I just wanted you to understand Henry and that he'd never lie to you or lead you on. It's just that he doesn't understand things that are so obvious to the rest of us and he says the wrong things all the time and has no idea why things go wrong for him. He's incredibly hard work but he's a real sweetie inside. I just, I don't know, I just didn't want you to misunderstand him.”

Carol had sat there just watching Julie as she talked, her eyes occasionally flicking to Jamie, who sat there silently yet massively reassuring, fully attentive throughout. The bustle of other visitors to the cafe had gone unnoticed.

“Thank you,” she said a while after Julie had finished. She gave a long drawn out sigh and shook herself, like someone had walked over her grave.

“I’ve known some serious liars and I thought Henry was another one,” she continued. “Like he pretended to be single but was actually living with someone. I couldn’t handle it so I just stopped talking to him.”

“I understand,” said Julie. “I really do. I’d have probably made a scene but I’m not you.”

“The thing is,” Carol continued, “I’m back with my ex. He moved in with me a couple of weeks ago. He’s the biggest liar I’ve ever met but since he lies about everything at least I know when he’s lying.” She gave an ironic little laugh. “Story of my life really. Oh well. I’d better get back to work. Thank you for the, umm, chat. And the coffee.”

She got up and walked away. After a couple of paces, she stopped and turned.

“Tell Henry I really did like him.” She turned away then back again. “And tell him I’m sorry I hurt him. Really sorry. But ...” She shrugged. A tear trickled down her cheek and she walked away, pulling some tissues out of her coat pocket. She stopped at the edge of the pavement, about to cross the road then turned to look back at them. She indecisively gave a half wave and then turned and crossed the road and went inside the library. Julie watched her all the way, her mind both full and blank at the same time.

“Well, that’s that then,” she said quietly. “What do I tell Henry?”

“Tell him the truth,” said Jamie. “He deserves to know the truth. Carol’s gone off with someone else and he needs to know that. He can find someone else.”

“Can he?” asked Julie. “You really think so?”

“Yes,” said Jamie. “He found you then he found Carol. Someone else will come along and he's getting better all the time.”

“I do hope so,” said Julie. “She seemed a nice girl. Did you see her nails though? Like were they for real? Gross.” She inspected her own manicured fingers to reassure herself.

Later that evening Julie broke the news to Henry.

“Me and Jamie were at the library today,” she said. “We bumped into Carol.”

Henry didn't think to ask how they knew Carol. He looked up expectantly.

“She gone back to her ex,” said Julie quietly. “That's why she's not seeing you anymore. I'm sorry.”

Henry looked down at the book he'd been reading. The page was blurred and indecipherable.

“Yes,” he thought. “That sounds about right.”

“I'm going to my room” he said. “Oh by the way, I won the competition.”

* * *

Henry had elected to take the specialist unit on Desserts when the new term began in early January. He'd been looking forward to it since desserts were quite different to meat, fish and vegetables. He was finishing his lunch in the cafeteria on his own on the first day back when he heard a familiar voice.

“Can I join you for a few minutes?” said Carol.

Henry looked up at her. “Certainly,” he said.

“Umm,” she said uncertainly, “how did you go in the competition?”

“I won,” said Henry. He sounded fairly detached about it even though he'd been very pleased at the time. It was the first competition he'd ever won. “I have to go to Guildford for the County Championships in February.”

“I was hoping to run into you,” said Carol. She hadn't really heard what he'd said.

“I, like, had a long talk with Julie about you, before Christmas.”

“I know,” said Henry. “She told me you were living with someone.” He now understood what that meant and it made him feel sad.

“Yes, well, not any more. He wasn't the right person for me and I threw him out,” said Carol. “The day after I talked with Julie, actually. I'm living on my own again now.”

Henry felt unaccountably nervous. Was she trying to tell him something and he was too dense to understand?

“Listen, Henry,” Carol reached out and touched Henry's hand then pulled back quickly. “I'm really sorry I hurt you. I know I did because Julie told me and I'm, like, really, really sorry.”

She paused then went on in a rush.

“But you're not the one for me either. You have no ambition, no drive. I want someone who knows what he wants and is going places. You don't. Things just happen to you and you let them and you, ohh, I don't ..., I mean, like, I really liked you, I mean I still like you and although there was that misunderstanding, I still liked you, a lot, but you're not the man for me, do you understand?”

She stood up suddenly. “I'm sorry Henry, I never meant to ... goodbye” She left the cafeteria rapidly.

Henry stared after her, watching her until the swinging door closed behind her. His sad eyes spoke volumes his mind could not fully

comprehend. He sat there quietly for a couple of minutes then got up and went home, missing the afternoon session.

Allan arrived a few minutes before Denise was due back. They were going to the cinema later. He went into the lounge to find Henry sitting alone, watching the TV which wasn't turned on.

“Hello, Henry,” said Allan cheerfully. “How are you?”

Henry looked up at him.

“How do I learn ambition?” he asked. “Is there a book about it?”

Chapter Twenty

The finalists mingled nervously backstage at Fairfield Hall in Guildford, awaiting the results of the judging. The competition had been fairly straightforward since it had been sponsored by a local pig farming consortium who, in exchange for financing and providing the ingredients and cooking facilities, had been allowed to set the menu the competitors had to produce. Consequently pork featured heavily as the consortium saw the competition primarily as a marketing exercise for pork products.

Henry had been one of the competitors in the middle group of six and had used his two hours of allotted time efficiently to complete the required three course meal of Pork Tenderloin Crostini with Pepper-Cranberry Jelly hors d'ouvres, Grilled Pork Chop and Apple-Pear Topping for the main and Pinot Truffle with Chicharrón for dessert. By grilling the tenderloins and chops together he had saved at least ten minutes which he was able to use at the end to ensure his offerings were beautifully arranged and garnished ready for the judges before the bell went. A couple of the others had been less efficient and theirs looked rushed and perhaps slightly less than appetising. The truffles of one poor lad had not fully set and were visible wilting, the pork rind toppings sinking slowly into the truffles. He had left shortly afterwards and hadn't bothered to come back for the awards ceremony.

Henry had spent the time of the final heat sitting with Julie, Denise and Allan in the audience, making desultory conversation. He wasn't experienced with competitions. Apart from the college's, the only other competitions he'd been in were one for penmanship in primary school and one for art in secondary school and neither had attracted any comment of note. Understandably he was agitated and couldn't relax and found Julie's running commentaries on the facial expressions of the judges as they tasted and poked and argued amongst themselves mildly irritating.

Still, the time passed quickly enough and when the competitors were called to assemble backstage he leapt to his feet and vanished with barely a backward glance and a quick visit to the toilet. The Master of Ceremonies came on stage and spent a couple of minutes trying to get

the microphone working with the help of a harried looking technician.

“Testing, testing,” reverberated around the hall before someone turned the volume down to tolerable levels.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Now that we've got that working I'd like to welcome you to the Surrey Colleges Apprentice Chef of the Year Awards.” he said amid scattered applause. He went on to give a brief history of the event and then thanked each of the judges for their sterling efforts and the pork farmers consortium for their continuing and valuable support, the Council for making the hall available for the day, the competitors for their dedication and commitment and the audience for turning up.

The competitors stood in small groups or alone, each nervously waiting. Henry stood at the back, slightly apart from the others, twisting his cap in his hands. After an extended pep talk by Julie he was half convinced that he might have a tiny chance of coming third.

“And now the moment we've all been waiting for,” beamed the MC as he pulled a sheet of paper from his inside pocket and unfolded it.

“In third place, will you please give your appreciation to,” he paused for effect, “Rory Ninton of Oxted Community College.” Rory's support contingent went wild with excitement.

Henry's heart sank. He was bitterly disappointed.

“Well, that's it,” he thought. “I should have known better than to get my hopes up. I hope Julie isn't too disappointed.” He untwisted his cap and put it back on his head and started to surreptitiously edge towards the short staircase at the back of the stage. Rory Ninton stepped forward, grinning like a Cheshire cat and collected his small trophy with unconcealed glee.

Henry tripped over a small pile of cable and stumbled, catching himself just in time to avoid falling down the steps and he didn't hear the MC saying

“In second place, Clair Buckstead of Woking College,” Clair's support

was smaller than Rory's but made up for it by being a lot more exuberant.

Clair leapt into the air and gave a small scream and rushed over to the MC in case he changed his mind. When he handed her her trophy she kissed it a couple of times and flung her arms around the MC who clearly enjoyed the experience.

"And now for the winner," said the MC over the loudspeakers. Henry had drawn roughly level with the MC but was on the audience level and was heading to where Julie and the others were sitting. The MC nodded to the technician for a drum roll and the technician pushed a button on his console. It was muted but reasonably audible.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," theatrical pause, "the winner", pause, "of the Surrey Colleges Apprentice Chef of the Year Awards," pause, "and who will go on to represent Surrey at the National Colleges Apprentice Chef of the Year Awards," pause, "in London", pause, "in April," pause, "is," longer pause as he double checked his sheet of paper then raised his voice, "Henry Curshaw of Bishopsford College!" He threw his arms open wide. "Let's hear it for Henry Curshaw!"

The crowd applauded loudly and Julie leapt to her feet and screamed with excitement, jumping up and down.

"Henry Curshaw, ladies and gentlemen," called the MC, waving one arm at the competitors at the back of the stage. None of them moved.

"Umm, where's Henry Curshaw?" the MC muttered to his lady assistant, forgetting to put his hand over the mike so the entire audience heard.

"He's down the front," screamed Julie, pointing to where Henry was trying to unobtrusively make his way back to where they were sitting. There was widespread laughter as the MC turned to one side and saw Henry.

"There he is, ladies and gentlemen," he called out, pointing at Henry. "Come on up here, Henry" and he waved his arm at Henry, urging him to come back on stage.

Henry became aware of his name echoing around the hall and everyone staring at him. He froze, half stooped, in panic. Julie came rushing down the aisle and grabbed his hands. "You won, you won!" she shouted at him and dragged him to the steps at the side front of the stage. As she pushed him on stage, Henry's bright red face, standing out against the white of his uniform, became visible to all. The MC stepped across and grabbed Henry's arm, raising it above his head in triumph.

"Henry Curshaw, ladies and gentlemen. At last!"

The MC dragged Henry to the centre of the stage, beckoning Julie to follow. His assistant passed him the winner's trophy and the MC handed it to Henry, pausing for a few moments with his hand still on it so the photographer could get a decent shot with him in it. Then he stepped back and pushed Henry forward. Henry dropped the trophy and Julie picked it up for him and made sure he had both hands on it. There was widespread laughter from the audience. Denise was crying happily in the fourth row.

"Oh gawd," muttered the MC. Being an experienced professional he could see that there was no possibility of a coherent interview, however short, with Henry.

He applauded a few times and gestured with his hands towards Henry. He turned to Julie and raised the microphone.

"And who are you, young lady?" he asked her.

Julie beamed and tilted her head towards the mike. Stage fright was unknown to her as she lived her entire life on display.

"I'm Julie," she said in a loud clear voice. "Henry lives with me," and flicked her long blonde hair back and surveyed the audience as though born to stardom.

Henry stood there motionless, the trophy hanging loosely in front of him while the audience applauded and several people catcalled loudly.

"Hold the trophy up," hissed Julie. When Henry failed to move a

muscle she stepped forward and raised the trophy herself, checking he had a firm grip on it then stepped back.

The MC had had enough, it was only a minor cooking competition after all. "OK, get him offstage" he muttered to his assistant and turned back to Julie to find she was already following Henry and the assistant offstage. When he was offstage someone came up to Henry and tried to take the trophy away from him. Julie wouldn't let her.

"We have to get it engraved," the girl said impatiently. "You'll get it back tomorrow."

Reluctantly Julie let the girl take the trophy away from Henry. Henry was in a daze, he had no idea what was happening. Julie led him back to where Denise and Allan were waiting. Several people clapped him on the shoulder as he went by, saying "congratulations" and "well done". One person smacked Julie on her bottom but she ignored it.

Denise flung her arms around Henry and hugged him tightly and kissed his cheek. Allan shook his hand. "Brilliant, awesome" he said, beaming. One of Henry's lecturers from college who'd come to the event for the fun of it came up to Henry and congratulated him. The girl who'd taken the trophy away came up and handed a roll of paper to Julie.

"That's his certificate," she said. "Don't lose it."

Julie unrolled the paper and saw that it was indeed a certificate with Henry's name neatly inscribed underneath FIRST PLACE with a big red seal and the signatures of the committee members.

"We need to get a frame for it," she said to Allan. "Can we stop somewhere on the way home and get one?"

They were more than halfway home when Henry started to come back to life.

"I won?" he said in disbelief. "Me? Is this some kind of joke?"

Julie smiled happily at him and showed him the certificate. Henry ran

his finger across his name to reassure himself.

"You'll get the trophy back tomorrow," said Julie happily. "They're getting it engraved. We're so proud of you, Henry." She hugged his arm.

"That girl said they'd also send you the information pack about the National competition," said Denise. "You never told us there was a national one."

"What national competition?" asked Henry.

"The MC said that you were the winner here and you are going to London for the National competition to represent Surrey," said Allan, taking his eyes off the road for a moment.

"Oh god," said Henry. "I thought it was all over."

* * *

Carol had spent the afternoon looking at the photographs her parents had taken on their world tour. Her father had taken early retirement from his practice as a lawyer and he and Faye had used some of his substantial lump sum travelling for the last eight months. Daniel was also trying to write his memoirs, hoping to emulate the success of *Rumpole of the Bailey*, written by a former barrister and made into a TV series. They'd arrived at Carol's apartment on Saturday and were spending a couple of days there before going back to their home.

Daniel had taken Faye and Carol to dinner at a local Italian restaurant and they were now back in her apartment, contentedly sipping wine. Daniel and Faye were pleased to be back in England and were looking forward to being back in their own house after months of living in hotels.

"We'll show you the pictures from Asia tomorrow," said Faye. She'd enjoyed looking at the pictures from Europe and America and remembering the joyous moments of their trip but she was anxious to get updated on her only daughter's life.

“Are you still seeing Les?”

“Oh god no,” said Carol. “I dumped him just after you left.”

Faye breathed a sigh of relief. They'd never liked Les and were glad to see the back of him.

“We got back together before Christmas,” continued Carol, “but it only lasted a couple of weeks.” She didn't sound particularly upset about it.

“Have you met anyone since?”

“I did meet a nice chap at college. His name was Henry,” said Carol sadly. “He's a chef.”

“What happened to him?” asked her mother, noticing Carol's sudden change in mood and liking the sound of a chef. It had a reliable, homely feel to it. Unlike Carol's usual choice of boyfriend.

“There was a misunderstanding,” said Carol, not wanting to go into it too deeply as she didn't think it would reflect too well on her. “That's why I got back with Les. Bit of a rebound thing.”

“But you got the misunderstanding sorted out?” asked Daniel. As a lawyer he liked to get things clarified.

“Yes, a friend of his found me and explained everything. But I was with Les by that stage.”

“But couldn't you have got back in touch with this Henry after finishing it with Les?” he persisted.

Carol had a sip of wine and shook her head.

“No, I'd rather burnt my boats by then. It was too late.” She gazed into the empty, disused fireplace.

Daniel and Faye exchanged looks, Carol was different somehow and they wanted to pursue things but weren't certain how. Carol sensed

her parents wanted more information and she hadn't really talked with anyone about Henry after her long chat with Julie. She sighed and tipped some more wine into her glass. It was a good quality wine and was making her feel mellow.

"I had a long talk with Henry's friend," she said quietly. "and she explained how loyal and sweet he was and, I don't know, innocent, I guess. But I was back with Les and you know what a lying lazy shit he was and when she told me Henry didn't have any ambition I guess I kind of just reacted against Les."

Faye frowned.

"I got rid of Les the next day," Carol continued reflectively. "All the talk about Henry had made me realise that Les was absolutely not for me under any circumstances. But the thing is, you see," she paused. "The thing is I'd told Henry's friend that I wanted someone with ambition, with drive and determination. And she'd have gone straight back and told Henry that. So I couldn't you see. I couldn't go back to Henry after I'd said that."

"You know," said Daniel. "For someone who's so intelligent and has a masters degree, you can be really stupid sometimes. Surely you know that behind every great man is a woman guiding and encouraging him?" He topped up his own and Faye's wine glasses. "If you love him his lack of ambition doesn't matter in the slightest. You can steer him in the right direction."

"Yeah I know, dad," said Carol. "I realised after I'd got rid of Les that he'd been clouding my thinking. I was reacting against him so much that when I had the chance I missed it. I told Henry's friend I wanted someone ambitious as a way of denying Les, do you see that? It took me a few days to see it myself but it was too late then."

"Did you love Henry?" asked Faye softly.

"I don't know mum," said Carol quietly. "But I could have. So very easily. But I fucked it up. Again. Just like I always do."

She put her wine glass down and stood up.

“Why isn't life ever as clear as a painting? I need the toilet.”

* * *

When Henry turned up for class the following Thursday there was a round of applause from the other students to Henry's embarrassment. He sat down in his usual spot and hoped they'd stop very soon.

“We're having a party at the end of the day to celebrate,” said the lecturer. “The Head of Catering wants to give a speech and he's having a cabinet made to display your trophy. You have to be there, although you don't have to make a cake, we'll do that.” She laughed.

Henry spent the rest of the day in an agony of anticipation, knowing he was going to be in the spotlight and hating the prospect.

“I suppose I'd better be there,” he thought to himself. “I can't run away from everything.”

* * *

Carol stayed late after college that day. She had a major assignment due the next week and needed to spend some time in the college library doing some research. Library and Information Science was turning out to be more difficult than she'd anticipated.

It was around 8.30 when she packed away her notes and returned the books. Leaving the library she walked to the side entrance of the college building. It was dark outside and chilly although the rain had stopped. She started walking towards the bus stop, her heels clacking on the ground. There was no one around. All the day people were long gone and the few evening classes running were still busily engrossed in their rooms.

Den and Billy were bored. They were both supposed to be in their evening class but neither was overly interested in welding and it was a little over their heads anyway. It was more fun to hang around college trying to pick up girls although there weren't any around that night.

Carol came round the corner of the building and walked right into

Den.

“Allo, she wants me bad,” he laughed.

Billy prised himself away from the wall and looked around. There was no one around and only one of the two street lights was working. The closer one had failed and this side of the almost empty car park was fairly dark.

Carol apologised and tried to walk on but Den stepped in front of her. She tried to step back but Billy had come up close behind.

“Wanna come to a party like?” asked Den. “Just the three of us, somewhere private like.”

“Go fuck yourself,” said Carol unwisely and tried to push past. Den didn't move.

Billy was irritated. “Bitch,” he said and grabbed her shoulder and threw her against the wall. Carol's head cracked against the brickwork and she felt dizzy. Billy stepped up close and grabbed her throat and tried to undo the front of her coat. His grip tightened and she struggled to breathe.

* * *

A few minutes earlier Henry had left the party in his honour. The Head of Catering had given a touching little speech about the great honour Henry had achieved for the college and that he had high hopes for the future.

“The Nationals,” he exclaimed in raptures. “We've never had anyone go to the Nationals before!”

Henry had had a slice of cake but hadn't eaten anything else since lunchtime. The glass of cheap champagne John had thrust upon him had made him feel quite lightheaded and daring. Sufficiently daring in fact to make his own speech in reply, even though it was barely two sentences.

“I’m proud to have won the County Championship.” he’d said. “And thank you to everyone at the college for their help.”

Despite this Henry didn’t particularly like this kind of event, especially when it was focused on him so after a while he made his excuses and left. Stepping out into the chill night air he took a deep breath.

“I really need to get something to eat,” he thought.

He started to walk along the side of the building to where he’d parked his car. There was something going on at the end of the building. As he got closer and his eyes adjusted to the darkness he realised there was some sort of fracas going on. He looked around, there was no one else there. Moving closer he could see two men were apparently struggling with what might have been a woman.

* * *

Carol could feel her consciousness beginning to slip away as Billy’s hand round her throat made her choke. She could feel his hand roughly exploring inside her ex-army surplus greatcoat as his body pressed her against the wall.

“HEE”

The cry pieced the night air. Billy let go of Carol as he and Den swirled round to see where the sound had come from. Carol started to slump to the ground, half aware that something strange was happening.

“KIA KINO NEI HOKI KA MA’TE KA MA’TE KA’ORA KA’ORA”

Henry was slapping his thighs and his chest, stamping hard on the ground.

Billy and Den started at him.

“‘ees a fucking nutter,” said Den.

They watched in fascination as Henry worked through the Haka.

“C'mon Den, get 'im,” said Billy as Henry came to the end. They started to advance and Henry went into his Kung Fu pose.

“Aw shit,” said Den. “ee's one of them kung fu fuckers. I'm outta here.” He disappeared into the darkness.

Billy looked at Henry who stepped towards him and stuck his tongue out.

“HEE”

Alone, his courage deserted him and Billy turned and ran after Den. Henry slowly straightened up and stood looking in the direction they'd gone.

“Wow,” he said, and giggled.

Carol groaned. She was squatting limply, supported by the wall. Henry ran over to see who it was and if she needed help. He helped her to her feet and she groaned again and turned her face towards him.

“Oh god, Carol!” cried Henry. “Are you OK?”

“Henry?” gasped Carol in a weak voice. “Henry, is that you?”

She fainted.

Chapter Twenty One

Henry caught Carol as she collapsed and held her while he looked around for help. There was no one there.

“I need to get her to the hospital,” he thought. “Where’s my car?”

He tried to drag Carol over to his car but he wasn’t strong enough so he gently laid her on the ground and rushed to bring his car to her. When he pulled up she was coming round and trying to sit up so he helped her into the car and put her bag on the back seat.

“Where are we going?” asked Carol weakly, her voice a little hoarse and whispery.

“The hospital,” answered Henry, fighting to stay calm.

“No, no” said Carol weakly, “take me home. I just need to go home.” She closed her eyes and sank back into the seat.

Henry pondered indecisively. He hadn’t seen any blood but she might have internal injuries.

“Oh lord, what to do?” he cried in his head.

Carol opened her eyes briefly and gave him her address so Henry took her home. He could always take her to the hospital later.

He helped her into her apartment building and up the flight of stairs, her shoulder bag over his own shoulder. At the door he fumbled in her bag and found her keys and opened the door. Carol lurched in, her face ashen, and Henry helped her take off her greatcoat. She lurched to the couch and sat. Shock began to set in and she started trembling.

Henry sat beside her, not knowing what to do. Her face was gaunt and starkly pale against her dark hair. She started to cry. Uncontrollable sobs racked her body. Henry reached out and put his arms around her and held her tightly. He started talking and stroking her hair. He knew from his own experience with Julie that what he said didn’t matter. All that mattered was the contact and the soothing tones, the presence of

another, sympathetic, human being. She clung to him, shaking like a leaf as her fear and pain and anguish poured out. He held her and talked gently, slowly rocking her until she calmed, her emotions spent.

When she relaxed her desperate hold on him, Henry went to the kitchen and returned with a bowl of warm water and a fairly clean dishcloth and began to gently wash Carol's face. She started when the cloth first touched then relaxed back into the couch and let him tend to her, removing her smeared makeup and soothing her swollen eyes. He left the bowl and cloth on the floor near the couch and went to find her bedroom. Returning with a blanket he wrapped her warmly and found a small cushion to put behind her head.

"When did you last eat?" he asked quietly.

Carol shook her head but didn't speak. Henry returned to the kitchen. Carol watched him silently through the kitchen door, following his every move as he found some milk in her small fridge and put some in a saucepan to heat on the stove. He rummaged through her poorly stocked cupboards and put three slices of bread into a bowl. He found some sultanas at the back of a cupboard and quickly chopped a handful as the milk heated. He scattered them on the bread and added a little sugar from a jar by the kettle then poured the milk over the bread and used a spoon to mix it to a warm mash. Spotting a dusty spice rack he sprinkled the mash with cinnamon and added a couple of aspirin he'd found in a plastic container on top of the microwave and crushed between two spoons.

Returning to the lounge he sat beside Carol and gently brushed her hair away from her face then spoon fed her. She stayed curled up inside her cocoon unmoving, her eyes intently watching Henry's face, her mouth dutifully opening each time his spoon touched her lips. When she had eaten all the bread and milk he used the dishcloth to gently clean some drops of milk from her mouth and chin, her eyes still intent on his face.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"My throat is sore," she said quietly, "and I think I hit my head."

Ever so gently Henry felt around the back of Carol's head and found a lump from where her head had hit the wall. There was no sign of blood which reassured Henry.

"I think you should go to bed," he said. "You need to sleep."

Carol nodded. Henry unwrapped her from the blanket and helped her to the bedroom. She lay on the bed and he slipped off her shoes and covered her with the sheet and blanket. She looked up at him.

"Hold me," she said in a whisper, "please hold me" and started to cry again. She rolled on her side to hide her face from Henry. He slipped off his shoes and got in the bed behind her and wrapped his arms around her. Slowly her crying stopped and her breathing grew peaceful. She slept.

Henry lay awake for some time, strange emotions pulling at him. His shock at his own daring to take on the attackers and horror at the discovery of Carol had long since receded and had been replaced by the powerful realisation that, for the first time in his life, someone needed him. Actually needed *him*. Needed his strength and his comfort, his presence, his touch. In time he slept too.

At some point in the night, Carol woke to find someone lying beside her. "Ohh, that's Henry" she said to herself, not questioning his presence as it felt strangely right. She snuggled into him, pulling the bedclothes tighter and drifted back to sleep feeling very safe and protected with his arms around her.

At 8 o'clock Carol's alarm clock went off and Henry woke in a panic, his surroundings unfamiliar and something warm and alive next to him. The events of the previous night came rushing back and he got out of bed to find he was still in his chef's uniform. Carol was still asleep, her hair in disarray on the pillow and her mouth open. She wheezed slightly with every intake of breath.

"I'm late for work," thought Henry to himself, rushing to the toilet and trying to find his shoes. Coming back into the bedroom he saw Carol lying there, small and vulnerable, bruising beginning to appear around her neck.

“Carol needs me,” he thought. “Work can wait.”

He found his phone and went into the lounge. “Someone needs me,” he thought, “gosh.” It was a very new sensation. There were nine missed calls on his phone and two text messages. Henry phoned Bryn.

“I won't be in today,” said Henry efficiently. “A friend of mine was attacked last night and I need to stay and look after her.”

“I need to look after her!” a strange thought indeed. And curiously empowering. Henry found he didn't really care what Bryn's reaction was.

“Don't worry about us, Henry,” said Bryn. “Take as long as you need and call me Monday to let me know what's happening. Nothing we can't handle here. You do what you need to do.”

Henry put the kettle on then decided he ought to phone the library and let them know Carol wouldn't be in. There was no answer so he left a message on their answering machine. He made some coffee and went to check Carol. She was still asleep and seemed peaceful. He returned to the lounge.

Checking his phone he found four of the missed calls were from Denise and five from Julie and a text from each, both saying much the same, “call me when you get this message”. He didn't feel up to talking to either of them so he texted Julie “carol attacked last night am looking after her” and left it at that.

“I'm looking after her. Wow!”

Henry put some eggs on to boil and was about to make toast when he thought toast might not be good for Carol's sore throat so he buttered the bread without toasting it. He checked his phone when it rang and saw it was Julie calling. He ignored it and made Carol some coffee. He couldn't find an egg timer so when he estimated her eggs were about done he made a couple of egg cups out of rolled up paper towels and put them on a plate with a teaspoon. He carried the plate and mug into the bedroom and put them on the floor while he made some space for them on Carol's cluttered bedside table.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he watched her breathe.

"I shouldn't be doing this," he thought sadly, remembering that Carol had stopped talking to him. "She doesn't want me around. She needed me last night but she's fine now. When she wakes up she won't want to find me here. I'd better go."

Quietly he got up, found his shoes and slipped quietly out of Carol's apartment. In his car he debated where to go.

"I suppose I should go to work now I'm not here with Carol anymore, but I'm really not in the mood," he thought. "What does Jamie say? Yes, Order - Counter-Order - Disorder, that's it. Bryn will have things organised without me now so if I go in I'll just confuse everything. Good."

He went home. Back at the house he rattled around in the kitchen for a while then went into the lounge. Sitting in his armchair he was thinking about the night before when he heard soft footsteps on the stairs and the lounge door creaking open. Denise peered round the door, brandishing the tube of the vacuum cleaner. When she saw Henry she breathed a sigh of relief and came in properly.

"Thought you were a burglar," she croaked and blew her nose. "Got a cold so I'm staying in bed today. Why are you here? Thought you were with Carol? We were worried about you."

"I decided not to after all," said Henry.

Denise studied him then laid the vacuum cleaner tube neatly beside the couch and sat down.

"Julie said you said she'd been attacked."

Henry nodded.

"Tell me everything that happened," said Denise, then sneezed into a large handkerchief.

Henry told her everything from when he left the party to when he left

Carol's.

"So let me get this straight," said Denise. "You spent the night in bed with her then left without saying goodbye?" With any other man she would have been disgusted but with Henry it just seemed so typical. She was absolutely certain he literally had just slept with her.

"Tell me why you left again?"

Henry explained his thinking, Carol didn't want to see him so she wouldn't want to see him when she woke up.

"Simple really," he thought. "What doesn't Denise understand?"

"I'm not quite clear," said Denise, wishing her eyes would stop running. "Carol stayed on the couch and just watched you, and didn't say anything?"

Henry nodded.

"Then she asked you to hold her in bed?"

Henry nodded.

"OK," said Denise. "I think I get it now. How do you feel?"

"I'm sad," said Henry.

"You still like her?"

"Yes," said Henry, unable to explain how he'd felt tending to Carol and caring for her.

"OK," said Denise, sneezing four times in quick succession. She held her head and groaned. "Oh Jesus. Now I'm going to tell you something and please don't ask me how I know, I'm really not up to explaining right now. Just trust me, OK?"

Henry nodded.

“One of three things is going to happen. One is that you won't hear from Carol again. I'd be surprised since I don't think she'd be that rude but you never know. Or she'll ring or text you to thank you. Most likely text since people don't seem to use the phone to talk anymore and anyway if she just wants to thank you she'll keep it very short. Either way, you're right, she doesn't want to see you again.”

“What's the other thing?” asked Henry hopefully.

“Pretty much anything else,” said Denise. “Most likely she'll contact you wanting to talk about last night or the weather or what's going on in Zaire or anything.”

“Why would she ask me about Zaire?” asked Henry, confused.

“Don't worry about Zaire, I just made it up. What I'm saying is that if she texts you about anything other than to thank you and disappear quickly it means she wants to see you again. She might even ring but I doubt it. And she'll almost certainly do it today.”

“But why ...” started Henry.

“Because she let you look after her last night and didn't say anything. Look, I'm in no state to explain. Just wait and see what happens, OK? I'm going back to bed.”

Denise picked up her vacuum cleaner tube and went back upstairs. Henry sat in silence for a while then went and got his charger and plugged his phone in and sat quietly beside it. If Carol did ring he didn't want the phone to go flat or be out of the room.

A text message came though late in the afternoon. Apart from a quick visit to the toilet he hadn't moved.

“need 2 talk 2u carol”

“ok” texted back Henry.

“2nite?” came back almost immediately.

“ok”

A long delay, then

“cafe opp libry@7?”

“ok”

“c u”

“Two and a half hours to go,” thought Henry, looking at his watch. “I wonder if Denise is awake?”

He quietly walked up the stairs and listened at her door. There were no sounds of sneezing, blowing or coughing so Henry guessed she was asleep. Which was a shame as he wanted to ask her what she thought Carol wanted to talk to him about. He went and had a shower instead.

“I saw your car outside,” said Julie, giving Henry a hard look as he came back into the lounge. “So Carol's OK?”

“I think so,” said Henry. “She was asleep when I left this morning and she seemed to be OK.”

“You left this morning?” said Julie dangerously. “So I suppose it never occurred to you to answer my frigging call this morning? Or to ring and let me know what was happening? Let us know?”

Henry stared at her. “Ummm,” he said nervously.

“I mean me and mum rang you loads of times last night when you didn't turn up. We both frigging texted you. But I guess it was such a freakin emergency so you couldn't ring us back.” Julie voice was hard. She took a deep breath.

“But this morning she's well enough for you to stop looking after her and so you thought 'Carol's fine so everyone else is'. Did you think to ring us to tell us you were OK? I guess you were so worried about Carol being OK that it never occurred to you that I might be worried about you. Well? Did it?”

Henry swallowed hard. It actually hadn't occurred to him.

"Ummm," said Henry. He looked at the floor.

"Jesus," said Julie. "You sod."

She slammed the lounge door behind her.

* * *

At 6.45 Henry was sitting at a table in the cafe waiting. There were two or three couples at other tables but the place was fairly quiet. A girl had asked him what he wanted and he'd told her he was waiting for someone and she walked off with a complete lack of interest. Surprisingly Henry was quite calm. He was curious to know what Carol wanted to talk to him about but he hadn't been able to think of anything he'd done wrong so he was fairly sure he wasn't going to be in trouble. Denise hadn't woken up and Julie hadn't come back before he'd left so he hadn't been able to get their insights. He felt a little like a secret agent on a mission into unknown territory.

The door opened and Carol walked in. She looked around and saw him and gave him a nervous smile. She joined him at the table but kept her greatcoat on. Henry noticed she was wearing a scarf around her neck.

"How are you?" he asked.

"Fine, thanks," she said automatically. "Umm, thanks for coming."

The girl appeared and they both ordered coffees.

"Weather's pretty shitty, isn't it," said Carol, looking at him searchingly.

"Yes," agreed Henry.

The silence began to drag.

"Jesus," said Carol, leaning forward suddenly. "Look, I ..."

The girl arrived with their coffees and there was a few moments of activity while they sorted out who's was which. When she'd gone, Carol picked up her spoon and started stirring her coffee. She studied the froth on top intently.

"I had a funny dream last night," she said without looking up. "You were in it."

She looked up at Henry then back down at her coffee.

"I dreamt I was attacked by a couple of yobs outside college. And I dreamt you fought them off and saved me and took me home and fed me and looked after me and cuddled me in bed. Then I woke up and you weren't there so it must have been a dream. But there were some boiled eggs beside my bed. And a bowl of water on the floor and then I saw some bruises on my neck in the mirror and there's a lump on the back of my head. Then I phoned the library to tell them I wasn't coming in and they said they already knew. Someone had left a message."

She suddenly looked up at Henry.

"It wasn't a dream, was it," she said flatly.

"No," said Henry. "Although I didn't fight them. I just did the Haka and they ran away. Just like Jamie said they would."

"That's the Jamie who's engaged to Julie?" asked Carol.

"No, they're not engaged." said Henry.

"But Julie ... no, it doesn't matter," said Carol and shook her head. She needed to focus on the real question she needed to ask, not get sidetracked.

"Why did you go before I woke up? I phoned you at work and they said you weren't in today so I know you didn't need to go to go to work."

"You told me you didn't want to see me anymore," said Henry. "I

didn't want you to see me there in case it upset you.”

“So you saved me those jobs and looked after me then skipped out so I wouldn't see you?” asked Carol.

“Yes” said Henry. “Why are people getting so hung up on this point?” he thought. “It's pretty obvious really.”

“You thought I'd be upset because you saved me and looked after me?”

Henry nodded. “Well she hasn't thanked me so I suppose that's a good sign, like Denise said,” he thought.

Carol just stared at him, wondering what to say next. She'd never encountered anyone quite like Henry before.

“I was going to cook you a shrimp soufflé,” blurted Henry.

“Last night?” asked Carol.

“No, when I was going to cook you something before you said you didn't want to see me again.” said Henry. “You were going to show me some of your paintings.”

Carol nodded. “I was a stupid little fool back then,” she said, looking back down at her untasted coffee. “I made a really bad mistake and ... well, yes.”

She looked up at Henry again. “Is it too late?”

He looked at his watch. “It's only 7.30,” he said.

Carol burst out laughing. “Oh Henry,” she said, “no, I meant is it too late to ask you to cook for me again?”

“Well we'd need to get to the shops and I don't know if there'd be any fresh shr...”

“Henry, stop,” said Carol, reaching out and taking his hand. “Shhhhhh. I didn't mean right now. I meant can I still ask you to cook for me

sometime or would you rather not? I mean, I do want to see you again but if you don't want to, ...”

Henry was a little confused by this but he thought that Carol had said she did want to see him again after all.

“I do get things wrong though,” he thought. “Maybe I should make sure.”

“So let me get this straight,” said Henry, unconsciously echoing Denise. “You want to see me again and you want me to cook for you?”

“Julie said he's very literal,” thought Carol. “I'd better make this as unambiguous as possible.”

“Yes,” she said. “Please. Ummm, how about tomorrow evening?”

Henry smiled for the first time since she'd arrived. “I'd love to,” he said.

Carol made certain that Henry had her phone number in his phone and got him to save her address as well even though he remembered it from last night. Just to be safe she got him to give her his address as well.

“How did you get my phone number?” he asked, curious.

“I remembered you worked at Ashton-Mole,” she told him, “so I got their number online and rang them. They told me you weren't in today but they wouldn't give me your phone number so I rang the library again and asked Nigel to look you up in our system.”

“So why did you want my address? Isn't that in the system as well?”

“You might have moved,” said Carol. “People often move and don't update their library records.”

“Oh,” said Henry. “I wouldn't have thought of that.”

* * *

Denise was up when Henry got back a while later. Julie had gone out for the night and she was drinking a mug of tinned soup while watching a tedious game show on TV. She looked decidedly better already.

“Any interesting news?” she asked when he came in, turning off the TV.

“Carol texted me like you said she would,” said Henry. For some reason he knew what she was referring to. “She wants me to go to her place and cook for her tomorrow night.”

He told Denise about their conversation at the cafe. Denise smiled and ‘I told you so’ but managed to refrain from saying it.

“But why did Carol say she thought it was a dream? She talked to me in the car going back to her apartment and she watched me, surely she must have known it wasn’t a dream?”

“Maybe,” said Denise, “maybe not. Under great stress the mind can do funny things and it’s quite possible she thought it all was a dream until she woke up and found the bruises. She may not even have realised then as she could have thought she was still dreaming. It might have been quite a while before she figured out she wasn’t and hadn’t. On the other hand she may have just been protecting herself.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it looks like she wants to get back with you again but she didn’t know if you wanted to get back with her so she might have decided to pretend she’d been dreaming so that if it turned out you didn’t want to see her again she could convince herself it *had* all been a dream and she wasn’t being rejected by you after she’d rejected you.”

Henry stared at her. “Are you serious?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Denise. “The human mind is very complicated and people go to incredible lengths to avoid things they’d rather not know about.”

She gave a little laugh. “Don’t worry sweetie, no one understands

anyone all the time. No matter how much time we spend with people we get most things wrong most of the time. Not even psychiatrists get it right a lot of the time. So what are you going to cook for her?”

“Shrimp soufflé,” said Henry. “Nothing complicated.”

He smiled happily and turned on the TV.

Chapter Twenty Two

The next day Henry cooked a shrimp soufflé for Carol, in her apartment, in her kitchen. He'd bought the ingredients earlier in the day and took along a soufflé dish as he suspected Carol didn't have one. She didn't seem to have much in the way of cooking equipment, as far as he could recall. Carol cleared an old, rickety wooden table of some half squeezed tubes of paint, encrusted with dried paint around the caps, a leaking bottle of methylated spirits, some exceptionally dirty rags and some broken somethings or other that weren't readily identifiable, and brought it into the lounge. She covered it with a clean pale pink sheet. Two empty beer bottles served nicely as candle holders and she'd managed to find two plates which almost matched each other and didn't clash too badly with the sheet. With the light out the colours didn't really matter anyway and it was quite romantic. Knowing Henry didn't drink, Carol had invested in a bottle of medium quality lemonade.

They chatted in a relaxed way about their studies and work over dinner.

"That was awesome," said Carol, pushing away her plate. "I never knew food could be so sensual. It wasn't just the taste but the textures and smell and ohh everything, even the feel of it sliding over my tongue and down my throat. I guess the ambience and company too. Normally I just grab something handy when I feel hungry. I've never really thought of food as a sensory experience in its own right before. What was it that gave a sharp edge to the smoothness?"

"I grated some lime peel into it," said Henry. "To perk it up a little."
"Hmmm," said Carol, gazing thoughtfully into a candle flame.
"Visually it was quite bland and uninteresting but, mmmmm ..."

She remained distracted for a couple of minutes. Henry was content to just sit and watch her. He liked looking at her as he didn't find her visually bland at all although he was willing to concede that the beige soufflé wasn't that exciting to look at even though the top was a nice dark brown in contrast.

Carol gave an unexpected shiver.

“Come on, I guess you'd better see some of my paintings,” she said reluctantly.

Henry followed her into another room. It had an easel facing towards the window and a number of rectangular canvases were leaning casually against the walls and there was an empty space where the dining table had been. The room spelt strongly of oil with a hint of meths and old dust.

“I don't really, umm, like people looking at my paintings,” said Carol. “I get embarrassed, which I guess is pretty sad for an artist.”

She gave Henry a rueful smile.

“Well, here it is. My studio.”

Henry looked at the canvas on the easel and Carol steered him away quite quickly.

“Don't look at that,” she said edgily. “It's not finished and it's going wrong anyway. The colours won't behave themselves.”

She looked around.

“Ummm, here, how about this one?”

She hefted a canvas roughly three feet by eighteen inches from behind a couple of others and propped it against the door.

“I'm not going to explain it,” she said. “It's all about how you the viewer feel when you look at it and afterwards, when you've stopped looking at it. I know what I was trying to achieve but that's my little secret. Look at it, just look at it and empty your mind. It's not a right wrong thing so don't think you have to try to explain anything to me. Just experience it.”

It was filled with a swirly pattern of shades of brown. Henry found it quite difficult to see where each shade ended and the next began but there were definitely shapes of colour.

"Feel it," said Carol, very quietly, "fall into it."

Henry gazed at the painting for some time then turned to Carol.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I don't want to be rude but it makes me feel depressed."

"Cool," she said with a smile. "It's touching your emotions, awesome. Try this."

She pulled out another. Henry glanced at it then pulled back suddenly. It was a pattern of brightly coloured shapes, some two dimensional, some three dimensional, some close, some far away, that seemed to be stacked on top of each other and at the same time falling down and collapsing.

"Wow" he said. "I felt like I was falling off a cliff or something. I had to jump back to save myself."

Carol smiled again, clearly pleased with his reaction. She showed him a few more, each producing an emotional reaction in Henry that he was starting to find disturbing.

Carol sensed his unease and brought the viewing to an end.

"Come on," she said, "let's go back in the other room. I'm pretty sure I've got some biscuits in a cupboard somewhere."

They both tried to go through the doorway at the same time and got in each other's way. Carol paused and lifted her face for a kiss but Henry apologised and stepped back to let her through first. After finding the biscuits, Henry sat on the couch next to Carol and she leaned against him.

"I won't ask you what you think," she said. "I hate it when people do that to me. They force me to try to say things with words that I can only feel. There aren't many feelings that can be described with words and the few that do don't even begin to do them justice."

"How do you mean?" asked Henry.

“Well, take fear for example or anxiety or depression” replied Carol. “We have exact words for those feelings but if you say 'fear' or 'depression' it doesn't give you any sense of the feeling of fear, of what it's like to be afraid or to be depressed. They're just names. Those are negative ones. Take 'hope' or 'awe'. I can say 'I feel hopeful' or 'I'm awed' and you'll have a very vague idea of what I'm feeling but you can't even begin to imagine what 'hope' or 'awe' feels like to me. It's different to colour for example. Although I can't describe 'yellow' to you in words I can show you 'yellow' so we both experience what I'm calling yellow even if you call it something else, but I can't show you my 'hope' or my 'depression'. There's no common reference point for feelings and emotions except on the very grossest level. The nearest we can get to relating is that you have to assume that the feeling you call 'hope' is in some way analogous to the feeling that I'm calling 'hope' but we don't even have any real way to compare them. And that's before we've started to express levels. My 'very hopeful' could correspond to your 'slightly hopeful'. Who knows? So really, it's a waste of time trying to express emotions in language. Especially since most things we feel don't even have words. Like how your soufflé felt in my mouth or the soothing touch of a kindred spirit in the middle of the night.”

She paused for a moment in thought.

“Here's another one. When you were looking after me Thursday night you must have felt something, you're alive after all, a sentient being, but I defy you to be able to explain that feeling to me in words and there is no way I can ever experience that feeling you had. That's what I try to do with my paintings. I can't hope to reproduce a specific feeling but I'm trying to use the painting to evoke a feeling in you the viewer which might give you an idea of what I was feeling.”

She twisted round to look at Henry but he was lost in the contemplation of the feelings he'd experienced feeding Carol the warm milk and bread. She could see she'd touched some aspect of his emotions and on an impulse kissed him lightly on the lips.

Henry did not react, other than to freeze, startled. Carol jerked back, embarrassed. She'd never had a man not react when she'd kissed him before. Then something Julie had said struck her.

“Ohh! Have you ever kissed a girl before, Henry?” she asked quietly.

“Only my mum,” said Henry, shamefaced.

Carol stroked his cheek.

“Then it's high time you did,” she said firmly. “Just relax and go with the flow.”

“That was ...” said Henry when she'd finished.

“Shh,” she whispered, touching his lips with her finger. “Don't try to talk about it, just feel it. Let's try it again. It usually gets better.”

A while later a thought occurred to Carol and she stopped kissing Henry.

“If you haven't kissed a girl before you won't have done anything else with a girl either. Have you?”

Henry shook his head, entire languages could not begin to describe the feelings he was experiencing.

“I know you've read some books on relationships,” said Carol gently. “Now it's time you found out about them for real.”

She stood up and led Henry by the hand to her bedroom. Henry followed her apprehensively.

* * *

“Oh, Henry,” said Julie a couple of weeks later as Henry was driving home on Friday evening. “You OK to take me into town tonight?”

Her car was being repaired and would be in the workshop over the weekend.

“I can't, I'm seeing Carol tonight,” said Henry.

Julie looked up from the nail she'd been filing and frowned. She pulled

out her phone and started texting irritably.

* * *

“Come with me, I want to show you something,” said Carol after breakfast the next day. She jumped up and went into her studio and turned on the light.

It didn't really look that much different to Henry.

“Remember when you first cooked for me?” ask Carol. “And I was going on about how it felt to eat that soufflé?”

“Yes,” said Henry.

Carol pulled a cloth from a painting propped against the wall.

“I tried to recreate that feeling,” she said. “It took me four attempts but I'm happy with this one. It's a painting of what it feels like to eat your shrimp soufflé.”

Henry looked at the picture.

“That large smooth yellow area is the velvety smoothness of the general taste and texture,” said Carol, looking at him for approval.

“What are those green things?” he asked.

“They're the bursts of lime on the edge, the sharpness, like razors in your mouth.”

“And those?” he pointed to some vague, shadowy areas.

“The shrimps,” said Carol. “The fishiness of the soufflé.”

Henry looked at the picture for a long time.

“That is so cool,” he said.

Carol hugged him.

* * *

On the way to work on Monday morning he went home to pick up a clean uniform.

“Don't you ever check your phone anymore?” snarled Julie.

“Sorry,” said Henry. “I put it on silent and forgot to turn it off.”

He pulled out his phone and there was a message from the day before from Julie asking if he'd be taking her to work on Monday.

“Sure, no problem,” he said. “I'll just quickly change.”

When he came back down Julie was still standing where he'd left her, irritation clouding her normal happy expression.

“You'll take me to the garage to collect my car after work?” she asked.

“What time?” asked Henry.

“Before they close, of course,” she said a little sarcastically.

“What time is that?” asked Henry patiently.

“Oh, how would I know?” said Julie impatiently.

“Better give them a ring then,” said Henry. “With Bryn away I can't leave before five at the earliest.”

Julie looked at him through slitted eyes but he was already on the way to the car.

“Come on,” he called back. “We're a little late already.”

They sat in silence on the way to work. Fortunately the garage didn't close until 5:30.

* * *

“So, Henry, come in for a chat.” said Bryn, a couple of weeks later.

He sat in his creaky office chair and gestured for Henry to sit as well.

“I’m leaving,” he said bluntly. “I’m going to be the Head Chef at La Maison d’Or in London’s West End.”

He paused to let that sink in.

“I actually gave in my notice just before I went on leave so management have been taking an interest in what’s been going on in here while I was on holiday and off sick.”

Bryn had had a week off to do some repair work around his home as his wife had been obliquely referring to various defects for a couple of years. Unfortunately, he’d slid off the roof while working on a TV antenna and broken his leg. He was now back with his leg in plaster. In his absence, Henry had been the Acting Head Cook.

“What do you mean?” asked Henry.

“Well you’ve been the Acting Head Cook for the last three weeks. What do you think I mean?”

Henry thought for a few moments then started to turn pink.

“You mean they’ve been keeping an eye on me?” he asked. “For Head Cook?”

“Yup,” said Bryn. “They wanted to know if you’re up to it as it’s easier to get another apprentice than a Head Cook. Now it’s not an absolute certainty, you’ll still have to be interviewed and so on but they know you. They asked me what I thought so I wanted to find out if you’re interested before I get back to them.”

Henry sat in stupefied silence.

“Can I get back to you on that?” he asked after a while.

“Don’t leave it too long,” cautioned Bryn. “They’ll have to start

looking for someone else very soon if you're not interested." He was a little surprised as he'd expected Henry to jump at the opportunity.

* * *

The following weekend Carol told Henry she had another painting she wanted to show him.

"This is my interpretation of that chicken in white wine you did last weekend."

It was basically a white canvas with assorted shapes in different shades of white with occasional smears of iridescent reds. It had an ethereal quality about it.

"It's making me feel hungry," said Henry, "but I don't remember putting fireflies in the casserole."

Carol put her hand in his hip pocket.

"That's the chili," she said, squeezing hard. "Hot, like you." She grinned up at him.

Henry picked up a painting that was blocking the window and took off the cloth that covered it. It was sensual and dreamy and full of purples and deep yellows that seemed to build the more you looked at it.

"What's this one?"

"Umm, that's how I felt when you first kissed me properly," Carol admitted. She took it off him and put it back against the window, wrapping it so no one could see it from outside either.

"And this one?" He pointed to the picture on the easel.

"Oh, that's not quite finished," said Carol, blushing. "It's still drying so I couldn't put a cloth over it. When it's dry it'll need some varnish."

She tried to distract Henry with another picture but he keep looking

at the one on the easel. It was a riot of colour and action with spirals and streaks and strange shapes flying all over the place.

“What feeling does it represent?” he asked, intrigued.

“Let's go and have some coffee.” said Carol. “I really want a coffee. Shall we watch a dvd?”

“Why won't you tell me?”

“Because I'm very embarrassed,” she said, bright red and not looking at him. “Get out of here.”

She tried to push him out of the room but her hand in his hip pocket was at an awkward angle. He didn't budge.

“It's fascinating,” he said. “Go on tell me. What dish does it represent?”

“Oh for god's sake. That's the first orgasm you gave me, OK. You weren't supposed to see it. Move, damn you,” and she dragged him out of the room and slammed the door shut. Henry turned almost as red as Carol.

More to break the embarrassed silence than for any other reason, Henry told Carol that Bryn was leaving.

“So you're going to become the Head Cook at Ashton-Mole?” asked Carol. “That's pretty impressive after only two years.”

“Bryn said I was a definite possibility,” said Henry. “But it's not guaranteed. And, erm.”

He paused, unsure of how to continue.

“And what?” asked Carol.

“Umm, I may not be applying for the job,” said Henry, looking at the floor.

“Why ever not?” asked Carol, surprised. “Surely you want promotion?”

“Well, you remember you said I lacked ambition?” said Henry.

“Yeees,” said Carol, remembering it only too well and feeling embarrassed that she’d ever said it.

“Well I had a long talk with Allan about ambition afterwards.”

“Allan is ...?” prompted Carol.

“Denise’s boyfriend,” said Henry. “And all he could come up with is that ambition is a determination to do something you really want to do.”

“OK, sounds reasonable.” said Carol. “But you don’t need to be ambitious to apply for a promotion. You just need to be able to fill out the application form.”

Henry laughed. “Well all I really wanted to do was cook, at least since I started cooking anyway. Before that I had no ambitions at all.”

“You’re leading up to something, hon,” said Carol. “Spit it out.”

“I was thinking about Bryn and about me being Head Cook and I’ve realised that I don’t just want to cook anymore. I want more.”

“What do you mean?”

Henry paused and shook his head.

“I may become Head Cook at Ashton-Mole but it’ll always be a works canteen. With basically the same menu every day, year after year. I’ve realised that’s not enough for me. I want more. I want to be able to change the menu when I want and cook for people who can appreciate what I cook and not bitch about whether there are enough chips and gravy with their pies.”

“Jesus,” said Carol, staring at him in astonishment. “You want to have your own restaurant, don’t you.” She burst out laughing.

Chapter Twenty Three

“Why are you laughing?” asked Henry, a little hurt that she found his big idea funny.

“Because when I said you had no ambition I had no idea you were dreaming dreams on such a scale,” said Carol. “Wow, a restaurant. Maybe even a chain of them. With lots of little stars. Way cool.”

Henry felt better, she was taking him seriously after all. They discussed a few thoughts about the idea over the weekend. Henry had come prepared with a clean uniform.

* * *

“Hello” said Jamie when Henry went home on Monday evening. “Hear you’ve got a girlfriend.” He winked at Henry.

Henry went pink. He was embarrassed but also excited by a thought he hadn’t been consciously aware of before.

“Wow, I have a girlfriend! Awe-SOME! Me!!” He wanted to punch the air.

“Hi Jamie, good to see you again,” he said instead. “Down for long?”

“Arrived Saturday, here for ten days” said Jamie. “End of General Duties, you see.”

“He’s going back on Stand By,” said Julie proudly. “Then he’s back on Active Duty for the last time, thank god.”

“Oh? What are you going to do then?” asked Henry.

“I’m taking over the training battalion,” said Jamie. “I’m getting too old for active service. It’s a young man’s game.”

“His knees can’t take much more,” giggled Julie. “By the way, did you see the vacancies list on the company website today?”

"No I haven't," said Henry. "Anything interesting there?"

"A new one appeared this morning. For Head Cook."

"Oh really?" said Henry, disinterestedly.

"Are you going to apply?"

"No. I'm just going to change then I'll do dinner."

"Just a minute," said Denise. "You're not going to apply for Bryn's job? Even though it's a promotion?"

"No," said Henry.

"You already knew, didn't you," said Julie, accusingly.

"Yes, he told me last week."

"And you didn't tell us?" Julie wasn't impressed.

"Umm," said Henry. A sixth sense honed over the years suggested that everything wasn't quite the way it normally was on a Monday evening. He sat down.

"Allan'll be here for dinner too," said Denise distractedly. "So why aren't you going to apply for the job?" She looked over at Julie.

"Surely he's not still lacking the confidence?" she thought.

"Umm," said Henry.

"You know you can do it," Denise continued. "After all, you were Acting Head Cook while he was away and you've been deputy for a long time now. Has anyone said anything?"

"Well Bryn asked me if I was interested," said Henry. "He thought management had been watching me while he was off to see how I'd handle it."

Julie had one hand wrapped around Jamie's inner thigh and the other scrolling her phone and his arm around her shoulders. She looked up.

"Did he say that management didn't think you could do it?" she asked.

"No," said Henry. "He was fairly sure they'd give it to me if I wanted it. There'd be an interview of course."

"Right," said Denise, relieved to have got to the bottom of it. "You're not applying because you've already been promised the job. Congratulations." She beamed happily.

"Umm," said Henry.

"You did tell him you wanted the job, didn't you," said Julie.

"Umm," said Henry.

"Oh god, Henry," said Denise. "How do you expect to get promoted if you don't stand up for yourself once in a while?"

"Maybe Henry doesn't want the job," observed Jamie.

"Of course he wants the job," said Julie. "Don't you, Henry."

"Umm," said Henry.

"Henry," said Denise, staring at Henry intently. "What did you say to Bryn?"

"I told him I'd think about it," said Henry, bravely he thought.

"What the hell is there to think about?" said Julie with a raised voice. "Why would anyone stop to think about a virtually guaranteed promotion? I frigging well wouldn't."

"Umm," said Henry.

"Well?" said Denise. "Tell us what there is to think about."

"I don't really want the job" said Henry, looking at the floor.

"Why the hell not?" said Julie, dropping Jamie's thigh but keeping a tight grip on her phone.

"Oh god," thought Henry.

"Henry," growled Denise.

Jamie watched him dispassionately.

"I don't want to cook the same old stuff day in day out for the rest of my life," he blurted, keeping a close watch on the floor.

"But it's a safe job." said Denise, bemused. "Secure. What other choices have you got, anyway?"

"Umm," said Henry.

There was a long silence.

"It's that fucking Carol, isn't it," spat Julie. "She's gone and given you ambitions hasn't she." She leaned forward suddenly and Jamie's arm fell down the back of the couch. "I frigging well knew that bitch would give him trouble."

"No," said Henry. "I want to do it myself."

"She's not a bitch," he thought. "She's lovely."

"Do what?"

"Run my own restaurant."

"You what?" said Denise.

"Friggin hell," said Julie.

Jamie just nodded to himself.

The tension in the room thickened, like a good sauce. Only it wasn't that good.

"Jesus," said Denise. "The boy's gone mad. Have you any idea how many restaurants fail?" She started to marshal her arguments.

"Evening everyone," said Allan happily as he came in then recoiled at the atmosphere in the room. "Jesus, what's happened?"

"Henry's gone mad," said Denise.

"That freaking Carol's turned his idiot brain," said Julie.

"Henry's got ambitions," said Jamie.

"Tell him, Allan," said Julie. "Tell him how setting up his own restaurant is a stupid freakin idea."

"What?" said Allan. "I don't understand."

"Henry's turned down a promotion at work so he can start a restaurant," said Denise impatiently. How could Allan not understand?

"Oh," said Allan.

"I haven't turned anything down," said Henry, looking up at Allan.

"You could at least have talked to me first," cried Julie.

"I just said I wanted to think about it," said Henry.

"Hello Allan, how are you?" said Jamie, with a grin. "Welcome to the nuthouse."

"Carol thought it was a good idea," said Henry

"I knew that slut would turn him against us," Julie was on the edge of tears.

"She's not a slut," said Henry, looking coldly at Julie.

“OK everyone, calm down,” said Allan. He was ignored.

“After everything we've frigging done for you,” cried Julie in a half shout. “Then you go and do what that, that *slut* tells you to do. And you won't even listen to the people who care about you anymore. I won't let her ruin your life, I won't. Tell him, mum.”

“Calm down Julie,” said Denise. “Tell her to calm down, Jamie. Calling people names isn't going to get us anywhere.”

“Calm down, Julie,” said Jamie obediently, knowing that it would be a waste of time. Julie never calmed down until she wanted to.

Julie burst into tears. Jamie put his arm around her again and she angrily threw it off. He shrugged and clasped his hands in his lap. His stomach growled.

Henry stared at Julie. “She's not a slut” he shouted at her silently. He wanted to shake her by the shoulders.

Denise slumped in her chair.

“Umm,” said Allan. “You know most restaurants fail very quickly. Umm and even if they survive for a while they're at all sorts of risks. One of my clients has just declared her cafe bankrupt because the Stoke Northam bypass took away her trade.”

“Oh shut up Allan,” said Denise. “No one cares about your damned clients.”

“All my life ...” said Henry quietly. Everyone looked at him.

“All my life,” he said again in a stronger voice, “people have been telling me what to do. Take these sports at school, take these subjects, take this job, be a man, drive me here, cut the grass, cook the dinner. I've had enough.”

He looked around at them, one by one.

“I've had enough,” he repeated. “It's my life and I'm going to live it the

way I want. I never wanted to be in that damned competition and I won it and they put me in for another and I'm not going to do it. And I'm not going to take that job because you tell me to. It's my life and Carol thinks it's a good idea and she's not a bitch." He glared at Julie. "She's my girlfriend. She. Is. My. Girlfriend."

He stood up.

"Get your own dinner," he said quietly. "I'm going to see my *girlfriend*."

Henry walked out of the room and shut the door quietly.

Julie's crying intensified and she ran out of the room and slammed the door noisily.

"Fuck," said Denise after a few moments. "I think I mishandled that." She groaned. "I suppose I'll have to do dinner."

"Maybe I should go?" said Allan.

"Time for emergency rations," said Jamie, "I'll order some takeaways."

The doorbell rang. "I'll get that," said Jamie.

"I, err, forgot my keys," said Henry. Jamie thought this was hilarious.

* * *

"Oh shit," said Carol when Henry had stopped shaking enough to explain what had happened.

She looked around. Her apartment, though plenty big enough for two normal people was barely big enough for one artist, and she needed her personal space too.

"Umm, I'd love it if we could live together," she said. "It would be, like so cool. It's just that I need space and solitude to think and paint. You can doss here for a few days but if it's going to be longer then we'll need a bigger place. When you're around you distract me."

"But I can just sit quietly and watch," Henry protested. "I won't get in the way."

"Maybe," she said, "but I can't. When you're here I can't keep my hands off you. You see? You're here now and look at what my hands are up to!" She grinned mischievously.

Henry didn't notice. "Live together?" he thought, "live together? As if having a girlfriend wasn't scary enough. Oh lord."

* * *

"We'll have ours upstairs," said Jamie, taking his two large pizzas and Julie's small one. "She's probably calmed down enough to not try to kill me by now. I'll take a cloth though in case she throws the pizza at the wall." He had some experience with Julie's patterns of behaviour.

Denise and Allan were left alone on the lounge.

"You know, this was bound to happen one day," said Denise. "We tried to turn Henry into a man so it was inevitable that one day he'd stand up for himself. If he didn't we'd have failed."

"Looks like you've done a brilliant job," said Allan, licking melted cheese off his fingers. He'd always found pizza to be unusually messy. At least pasta was in a bowl and you ate it with a fork.

"Maybe," said Denise. "Although I suppose we'll have to pick up the pieces when his restaurant fails. Unless Carol's up to it. I've never met her."

"Isn't she at the library?" asked Allan. "Librarians are pretty stable people."

"Yes, but she's an artist as well. God knows how weird she really is."

"Why not invite her to dinner and find out?" said Allan. "You're going to have to heal this rift with Henry anyway. He's a good lad and with your support as well as Carol's he just might make a success of it. After all, he's a damned good cook and if there's any justice in the

world people should flock to his restaurant.”

“Actually that's not a bad idea,” said Denise thoughtfully. “Although,” she jerked her head at the ceiling, “ will be a problem. I think she's pissed off that she's lost a worshipper. Maybe it would be best to let Henry go. After all, it'll be good practice for me for when Julie decides to go too. She's not going to be here forever.”

“That's true,” said Allan, trying to hide his pleasure at the prospect of having Denise all to himself. “One day she's bound to leave the nest.” He crossed his fingers behind his back.

* * *

Jamie was in a good mood. Julie hadn't thrown the pizza at him or the wall. In fact she'd even nibbled the corner of one slice and was now staring moodily at a teddy bear propped on the window sill that wore a t-shirt saying “I Wuv You Beary Much”.

“I'm curious about something,” he ventured.

Julie continued staring moodily at the teddy bear.

“I can understand how you'd be concerned about a friend undertaking a high risk mission,” he continued warily. “But I'm not sure why his girlfriend has to be an evil overlord.”

Julie stared moodily at the shade on her bedside lamp.

“Unless, of course, you're jealous of her.”

Julie stared moodily at Jamie. He flinched.

“Why would I be jealous of that little tart?” she said.

“Because she's taken away your toy,” said Jamie and tensed, ready to take immediate evasive action should hostilities ensue.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Just thinking out loud,” said Jamie, diplomatically.

She stared moodily at the teddy bear again.

“I appreciate you totally have Henry’s best interests at heart,” he said after devouring a slice of pizza in one mouthful. “But to an outsider, Henry might seem to be more of a servant.”

“Don’t be so frigging stupid.”

The teddy bear appeared to be wilting.

“Probably just an illusion caused by shadows from the headlights of a car going past,” thought Jamie, “although I didn’t hear one.”

“He more or less followed you everywhere,” he added. “Did whatever you told him to. He drove you everywhere, fed you, took you to see your friends, let you dress him, agreed with you on everything. Probably even ran your bath.”

Julie stared moodily at Jamie. He didn’t flinch this time. Definite progress.

“Oh fuck off.”

“And maybe, just maybe, now he’s grown up at last, you resent him not being your slave anymore. And, purely hypothetically of course, you resent Carol for coming between you and your plaything.”

Julie slipped her hand under the pizza.

“You’re a bastard, you know that?”

“Sergeant Bastard to you.”

Julie didn’t smile but she did remove her hand from under the pizza.

“You did it to yourself,” said Jamie.

“What do you mean?”

“You set out to make a man of him. You told me so yourself. You even went so far as to talk Carol back into seeing Henry again. What did you think was going to happen? He was going to fall in love with her and carry on being your toy?”

Julie threw her pizza at the teddy bear. Half-hearted or not, her aim was as true as ever. The teddy bear fell to the floor, oozing tomato topping.

Jamie edged his remaining pizza further away from Julie.

Julie sighed deeply. “I didn’t think it through,” she said. “I really like the little sod and it never occurred to me that if I helped him get stronger that he’d turn against me.”

“He hasn’t turned against you,” said Jamie. “You insulted his girlfriend and you ridiculed his choice of career. Seems to me you turned against him. Knowing Henry he’s probably petrified by the fact he has a girlfriend and instead of being supportive you called her a ..., what was it again?”

“A bitch,” said Julie quietly.

“And?”

“A slut.”

“And?”

“A little tart.”

“And is she any of those things? Come on, you’ve met her and talked to her. I was there.”

“No, she isn’t,” whispered Julie. “She’s really nice.”

Julie reached for Jamie’s remaining half pizza. He watched her warily. She took a slice and bit the end off then tossed it back into the box.

“I hate olives,” she said and spat the end at the teddy bear.

He waited. She was an intelligent girl but had to work things out for herself. You'd get nowhere trying to force her.

"I'm the bitch, aren't I."

She reached for her bag and pulled out a small mirror and a tissue and started to repair her makeup. Jamie heaved a sigh of relief. When Julie went back to her makeup, whatever the crisis was, it was over.

"So what are you going to do about it?"

"Do about what?"

"Henry has left home. Are you going to bring him back or let him loose?"

"It not up to me anymore, is it," said Julie thoughtfully. "It's up to him now. He can make his own choices. He's proved that."

"Yes and no," said Jamie. "You may not have left him a choice to make."

"What do you mean?" Julie started rummaging for her lipstick.

"He may think he isn't welcome here anymore," said Jamie. "He's been in this situation before, after all."

"Oh Jesus," said Julie. "That's right. Maybe I'm no better than his father." She put her lipstick, mirror and tissues on the bed and looked at Jamie.

"Did his father ever give him the option to come back, unconditionally?"

"No," said Julie. "I think he said he expected Henry to come back with his tail between his legs."

She started work on her makeup again.

"Oh shit," she said and flung the mirror and lipstick down. "I suppose

I have to fucking apologise. Jesus.”

* * *

Henry was in bed with Carol, practising at living together, when he got a text message.

“Aren't you going to see who that is?” asked Carol distractedly.

“I'm busy,” he said.

“Yes you are, aren't you,” said Carol. “Mmm, don't stop.”

“You've been invited to dinner on Thursday,” said Henry a while later. “By Denise. I wonder who'll be cooking it?”

“Probably you,” said Carol. “But I'm not going if you're not there. I don't really think I want to go anyway, not if Julie's going to be such a bitch. Did you pick up any biscuits on your way over here?”

An hour or so later Henry got another text message.

“Oh no, not another dinner invite?” said Carol. “I'm not used to a social life.”

Henry stared at his phone, then passed it to Carol.

“No,” he said, “It's worse than that. Julie has apologised. Wow.”

Chapter Twenty Four

Julie was in the bathroom, looking at herself in the mirror, when the doorbell rang.

“Oh shit shit shit,” she thought. “Right, bright and cheerful, happy thoughts.”

She fixed a smile on her face and hoicked her sweater down a little out of habit then pulled it back up when she remembered Carol was a girl. She smoothed her hair and went down to the lounge.

“Carol, sweetie, lovely to see you again, how are you?” She advanced and gave Carol a brief hug. “You look, like, awesome, totally. What a sweet beret, it's so you!”

In the car Carol had abandoned brushing her unruly hair and put on a beret she'd found in the door pocket to hide some dried paint she'd discovered at the last moment. The beret didn't quite go with her top but then neither did the paint. With luck she'd be able to find a pair of scissors and cut the paint out before she had to take off the beret. She'd managed to get the paint stains off her hands, apart from traces lodged in the cuticles of her nails.

“Umm, dinner's just about ready.” Henry stuck his head around the door and gave Carol a brave smile.

“Let's go into the kitchen,” said Denise and led the way.

“I do apologise for the setup,” she said to Carol. “For years there was only Julie and me and we only needed a small table then Henry came along and Allan so I got another table for when Jamie's here too. Now there's six of us. I daresay I'll have to get a bigger table. Umm, we don't entertain much.”

She'd tried to hide the fact the tables were slightly different heights by slipping a folded sheet under the tablecloth but it hadn't been totally successful.

Carol started to relax. She'd been vaguely imagining a huge oak table

with chandeliers and ornate table settings in a large, panelled formal dining room like something out of Downton Abbey and was relieved to discover they were having dinner in a cramped kitchen with a stool from the bathroom and a couple of outdoor chairs brought in from the shed and had table issues not unlike her own.

They milled around the kitchen, no one quite knowing where to sit, except Jamie who always sat on the bathroom stool as he had broken the fourth chair that had come with the table and Julie who always sat next to him. Eventually they were all settled and Henry served the hors d'oeuvre.

“That was delicious,” said Jamie, who'd eaten his three portions of bruschetta with his fingers before anyone else had finished theirs using knives and forks. He looked around expectantly.

“It must be nice living with a chef,” said Carol. “I live on my own and can never be bothered to cook much.”

“It's a living hell,” smiled Denise, “I must have put on fifteen pounds since Henry arrived. Henry made the bread for this yesterday so it would have time to go slightly stale and toast better. I've no idea how Julie stays so slim. Henry likes to use cream a lot.”

“I dance it off,” said Julie, on her best behaviour. Jamie sniggered and shut up quickly when Julie glared at him.

Allan collected the dishes while Henry fussed over the next course, his own bruschetta largely untouched.

“Henry tells me you're an artist,” said Denise.

“That's right,” said Carol.

“What sort of pictures do you paint?” asked Julie, not wanting to be left out.

“Umm,” said Carol who got almost as embarrassed talking about her paintings as she did showing them, “they're rather difficult to describe.”

“Carol tries to express emotions and feelings,” said Henry, proudly. “She paints her own feelings about things and tries to generate something similar in the person who looks at it. Go on, tell them what your master’s thesis was about.”

“Expressing the Inexpressible; Depictions of Sensation in Weimar Visual Art,” said Carol reluctantly. “Bit of a conversation killer, isn’t it.”

“Have you sold many?” asked Allan when it became apparent no one else was going to continue the topic.

“None,” admitted Carol with a self deprecating laugh. “I’m a little off the main stream.”

“Are you working on anything at the moment?” asked Denise.

Carol looked at Henry for help but none was forthcoming.

“I’m working on an interpretation of what it feels like to eat Henry’s moussaka,” she said, looking at her plate.

“That sounds like something you could have on the wall in Henry’s restaurant,” said Jamie, eyeing Julie’s plate. He’d finished his own and was still feeling peckish.

“It’s an idea,” said Carol.

Henry cleared away and brought out a rhubarb and apple crumble. Jamie smiled and got the jug of custard.

“Are you still thinking about your own place Henry?” asked Julie. “We all thought it was such a good idea,” she said to Carol before Henry could answer. “He’s so, like, talented. He’d be wasted in a works canteen. What do you think about it?”

“I thought it was a brilliant idea,” said Carol. “He’s got to follow his own destiny wherever it takes him. Making lots of money is such a sterile objective.” She smiled.

“Money doesn't buy happiness, that's true,” said Denise. “But having no money can leave you very unhappy.” She watched for Carol's reaction.

“Up to a point,” said Carol, leaving her spoon in her empty dish. “But you don't need much to cover the basic necessities. After that you should do what makes you happy, not what just makes more money. I work three days a week at the library and that pays my rent and buys paint and stuff. And Henry makes me happy and having more money won't get me more Henrys to make me any happier.”

“But a restaurant costs a fortune to set up and run,” said Julie. “Where's he going to get the money?”

“Umm,” said Carol.

“Actually it needn't cost much at all,” said Allan.

Everyone turned to look at him.

“There's basically two types of restaurant,” he said. “The mass market high street restaurants and the fancy upmarket places. The high street ones need a lot of capital as they need to be fairly large, in a town centre and rely on a lot of customers with a low profit margin which means high costs and the competition is cut-throat.”

He paused to finish his crumble.

“The other type relies on the name of the chef. It gets a reputation and attracts a small client base and relies on exclusivity. You can set up one like that very cheaply as it needs very few staff, the overheads are low and the margins are high.”

He looked around at the others. “Sorry,” he apologised. “I'm talking like an accountant. Bad habit since I am one. I'll shut up.”

“No, go on,” said Carol. “We've been worrying about the money side.”

“Well, I had an idea a couple of days ago,” said Allan. Denise was looking mildly interested and Julie was looking slightly bored. She had

her hand on Jamie's leg under the table and Jamie was finishing the rest of the crumble in the bowl. Henry was watching Allan intently.

"One of my clients has gone bankrupt," he continued. "She's had a successful cafe out at Stoke Northam but when they put in the bypass a few years ago it took away her passing trade and the cafe's declined ever since. She's been trying to sell but no one wants to buy a defunct cafe."

"So?" said Denise.

"The thing is, it's got a kitchen and dining areas and all the licences and so on and I'm sure she'd be willing to rent it out since it's just costing her at the moment."

He paused to let that sink in.

"Don't you see? Instead of paying out a fortune up front, Henry could rent her cafe and set up a restaurant for more or less just a weekly rental. He'd have to tart the place up and get decent furniture and so on but it'll be a hell of a lot cheaper."

"But won't the bypass still be a problem?" asked Carol.

"Not if it's set up as an exclusive, high class cuisine kind of place," said Allan. "People are willing to travel a long way to a quality place."

"How much would I need to set up in a place like that?" asked Henry.

"Oh, difficult to say," replied Allan. "Depends on what you want to do. You can pick up plastic chairs and tables for next to nothing for instance but high quality oak or teak would cost a fortune. Certainly you'd be looking at a few tens of thousands rather than a lot of hundreds of thousands."

Henry's face fell. "I don't even have one ten thousand, let alone several of them."

"If it's the right thing to do, the money will come along," said Carol. "That's how destiny works."

"I went to a restaurant once," said Jamie, reflectively.

"Oh you've been to loads of restaurants," said Julie.

"No, I meant in the Gulf."

Julie looked at him with narrowed eyes.

"It was Major Grantly's birthday," explained Jamie hastily. "No women."

"Hmm," said Julie.

"It was full of books," went on Jamie. "Books everywhere. Had to squeeze round 'em to get to the table. Food wasn't too bad but the place was famous for its books. Henry could do something like that too."

"Books?" said Denise. "Why would Henry fill his restaurant with books?"

"No, not books," said Jamie, one arm over the back of Julie's chair, playing with her hair. "Carol's paintings. Be a bit of a gimmick. Eat great food and look at what it feels like eating it." He grinned and belched appreciatively.

"Oh god," thought Carol. "People will be looking at my pictures."

"Excuse my pig," said Julie, dismissively. "He's just my boyfriend," and squeezed Jamie's thigh hard.

"Later, babe," he said and pulled her hair hard. Julie yelped and punched his shoulder.

* * *

A couple of weeks later Allan and Denise had the house almost to themselves. Jamie had gone back to his unit, Henry was with Carol and Julie was upstairs getting ready to go clubbing.

"I took Henry and Carol out to see that cafe I was telling you about this morning," he said.

"How was it? Denise asked.

"A bit run down but easily fixable. The owner is willing to rent it and she'll do the repairs. Henry was happy with the kitchen. The grills, hobs and fridges seem to work. He needs an oven but he thought he could get one off eBay. Carol had lots of ideas for decorating. Henry's handing in his notice on Monday. Says he wants to supervise the upgrades himself. There's also a small bungalow that goes with it. They're going to live there."

"But what's he going to do for money?"

"Ahh," said Allan. "Are you still dead set against the idea?"

"No, not any more. I'm getting used to it. When Julie was born security became very important to me but I can still just remember the excitement of being young and having everything still ahead of you." She sighed. "And Carol seems a sensible sort of girl."

"I'm glad to hear it. Umm, I, err, wasn't sure you'd approve," said Allan a little shamefacedly.

"Approve of what?"

"I told Henry I'd go into partnership with him as a sleeping partner, or rather my practice will, not me personally. My money, his work and we'd split any profits. Just on the restaurant mind. Carol's art is her own affair and the bungalow's their problem."

Denise stared at him in shock. "I thought you'd have more sense than to invest in a restaurant."

"I'm not investing in a restaurant," said Allan. "I'm investing in Henry. He's a hard worker and a great chef and if he's learnt to have faith in himself I don't see why we can't have faith in him too."

Denise frowned then smiled. "You're absolutely right," she said. "We

ought to have more faith in the boy.”

“Besides,” said Allan, “if it all goes wrong he's young enough and good enough to get another job and I'll get a nice tax write-off.”

“When's it opening?”

“Henry thinks it'll be ready in about three months. One of my clients is going to do some marketing for us. For a discount.” He smiled happily. “This is going to be fun.”

Julie came bounding down the stairs.

“I'm off now mum, oh hello Allan, how's things?”

“Allan's going into partnership with Henry on his restaurant.” said Denise.

Julie looked at Allan. “Really?” she said.

“He thinks we should have more faith in Henry.”

“I always had faith in Henry,” said Julie. “He's a sweetie! Don't wait up.”

As the sound of Julie's car died away, Allan looked at Denise.

“She, umm, said not to wait up,” he said, blank faced.

Denise burst out laughing. “Come on then, let's go make some noise,” she said and led the way to the stairs.

* * *

The next day Julie went for a drive without telling anyone. She wasn't sure of exactly where she was going but she knew the general area and drove around until she found the neat, detached house in a leafy crescent that she remembered. She walked up the path and knocked on the door.

“Hello,” she said when the door opened. “I don't expect you remember me but I need to talk to you.”

She was there for two and a half hours.

* * *

The work on the old cafe was completed in just over two and a half months. The night before the opening, Henry and Carol wandered round the place, soaking up the ambience.

“It looks pretty good, doesn't it, hon,” said Carol. “Your restaurant, our restaurant.”

They hugged and walked over to their bungalow.

“Fancy some coffee?” asked Carol.

“Love some. Just going for a pee, back in a minute.”

Carol brought the coffees into the lounge and wandered into her studio to look at a painting. There was something not quite right about it but she couldn't put her finger on it. After gazing at it indecisively for a while she wandered back into the lounge.

“He's having a very long pee,” she thought.

She went to the bathroom and knocked on the door. “Coffee's made hon,” she called.

There was no reply.

“Everything OK in there?”

Silence.

“Oh god,” thought Carol. She jerked the bathroom door handle and went inside. Henry was sitting curled up on the floor, squashed between the bath and the sink cabinet.

“Hon, Henry, what's happened?” She rushed over and touched him. He was shaking.

He rolled his head to look at her and opened his eyes.

“I can't do it. I can't do it.”

“Can't do what?” said Carol, fighting a rising panic.

“I'm not good enough, it's going to all go horribly wrong and it's all my fault I'm not worth anything I'm a fraud a failure I'm letting you down and Julie down and everyone and my dad was right, I'm just totally useless.”

Carol hauled him out and dragged him to the lounge when she sat with him on the couch and held him and tried to reassure him. She stroked his head and kissed him and promised that everything was going to be just fine but he kept shaking and saying he couldn't handle it and everything was going to go wrong.

Carol had a flash of inspiration and she dragged Henry to his feet.

“Do the Haka for me, Henry, come on, Hee, say it, say it, Hee”

“hee” said Henry.

“Again, louder”

“hee” said Henry.

“Keep going, louder.” She grabbed his hands and made him slap his thighs.

“KA MA'TE KA MA'TE KA'ORA KA'ORA” chanted Henry, starting to stamp his feet and slap his chest.

“Oh thank god,” said Carol to herself, collapsing on the couch to watch.

“Don't ever do that again,” she said when Henry had finished and had

sat down beside her.

“What, the Haka?” he said.

“No, freak out on me without warning. Next time you feel a panic attack starting you tell me, OK.”

“OK,” promised Henry. “I was just totally awed by what’s happening and I couldn’t handle it. I’m fine now, so long as you are here. You won’t leave me, will you?”

“No sweetie, I’ll never leave you.” said Carol, beginning to cry. “Not ever.”

* * *

The restaurant opening day dawned bright and clear. Leaflets had been distributed to selected neighbourhoods, advertisements displayed in local newspapers and magazines and a handful of invitations sent to selected local notables. A magazine for business travellers had said one of their reviewers might be turning up. Julie had bought Henry a proper chef’s hat but he’d decided to keep on wearing his old caps. They were part of his personality now.

As twilight descended, Henry turned on the outside lights, illuminating “La Maison d’Art”. Inside, Julie, Denise, Allan and Jamie were already seated, Jamie having pulled strings to wangle a day pass. In one corner a couple, lured by the advertising, were having apéritifs. Carol was tonight’s waitress as they’d both felt that for the opening night it would be good if the artist herself were present and they hadn’t yet found anyone they liked for the job.

Henry was preparing some hors d’ouvres for those who had already ordered when Carol came bouncing in excitedly.

“You’ll never guess,” she said to Henry, “There’s a woman out there who likes my paintings!”

“Of course she does,” said Henry, “they’re awesome. One in particular or all of them generally?”

“There's one I think she might want to buy,” said Carol, unable to stand still, “This middle aged couple came in a few minutes ago and looked at the paintings on the wall then the man asked if I'd painted them and then she pointed to one and said she really liked it. They want to meet you too. Come on, come on.”

She dragged him out into the dining area. “Them over there,” she whispered loudly.

The man turned from looking at one of the paintings. Henry froze in shock.

“Hello, Henry,” said his father.

Henry felt faint. He blindly reached for a chair and sat down.

“Oh god, he's going to wreck my opening night,” he thought. “How can I get rid of him?”

“Where's mum?” he said after opening and closing his mouth a few times.

“She's just gone to the toilet,” said Henry's father.

Henry pulled himself together.

“It's my restaurant and I'm damned if I'll let him ruin it.” he thought and stood up.

“Why are you here?” he asked in a firm voice.

“Julie told us about you.”

“What'????” thought Henry. “What's Julie got to do with this?”

“She told us what you've been up to the last couple of years and that tonight was your opening night and we thought we'd come and see what kind of a mess you've made this time.”

“Hee” said Henry quietly, staring at his father. “Ka Ma'te Ka Ma'te

Ka'ora Ka'ora”

“What?” said George, “Don't stand there spouting nonsense, boy. Talk some damned sense, for once in your life.”

Jamie looked puzzled and whispered something to Julie. She whispered back in his ear. He nodded and quietly slid his chair back, away from the table, just in case.

Henry stared at his father, his face twisting with emotions. George stared back, a half sneer on his face. The restaurant was silent as everyone watched. Carol stood to one side, confusion and concern battling on her face. Denise started whispering urgently to Julie who ignored her. She was watching Henry and his father intently.

Henry's mother came out of the toilet.

“Hello, Henry.” She smiled happily and hugged him.

“Hello, mum,” he said automatically and kissed her cheek.

“I like that painting,” she said, oblivious to the tensions in the room. “She's got a rare talent, that girl of yours.”

She looked appreciatively at Carol's painting of Henry's shrimp soufflé then back at Henry.

“How have you been keeping?” she said, not letting go of his hand.

George snorted derisively.

“Well, I s'pose we'd better eat something, though likely as not it'll be overcooked and tasteless. Menu's probably riddled with spelling mistakes too, shouldn't wonder.”

“Umm, perhaps this table over here, Mr Curshaw,” said Carol, white faced. She wanted to jump between Henry and his father, to protect Henry from ..., well, everything.

George ignored her. He stared at Henry in contempt.

“Pah,” he said and curled his lip.

Mabel let go of Henry's hand and reached over to George. “Let's sit down, dear.”

George glanced at her then at Carol.

“Don't like the look of that one,” he said, dismissing her. “We'll sit over there. Come on, Mable.”

“No,” said Henry, in a strangled voice. “NO!”

Jamie tensed, poised on the balls of his feet, watching every detail of the scene being played out like a bird of prey. Julie put her hand on his arm.

“Henry's got to sort it,” she muttered to him. “Don't interfere.”

“Now what?” said George, turning back to Henry. “Come on, spit it out, boy.”

“I'm not a boy,” said Henry, vehemently. “I am not a boy and you treat her with respect. Respect, do you hear me?”

George turned back to him.

“Or what?” he said with a laugh. “Useless pillock like you? What you going to do?”

Henry stared at him, his face red and angry, his fists clenching and unclenching.

“Get out,” he said in a strangled voice. “Get out of my restaurant!”

A middle aged man walked in the door of the restaurant, froze then walked straight out again. The door thumped behind him.

Henry half lunged at George, who flinched and stepped backwards. Jamie came off his chair and Julie grabbed his waistband and hauled him back.

“Stay out of it,” she said, her voice carrying. Jamie sat back down, warily.

The atmosphere thickened and the tension became unbearable.

“We’d better go,” said Mabel, quietly. “Come on, George.”

She touched his arm and George angrily shook her hand away.

“Right,” he said. “So that’s how it is, is it? Bad mouthing your own dad, is it?”

He slowly turned and walked, stiff legged, to the door and opened it.

“Good riddance,” he said, pausing and looking back at Henry. “Good riddance to old rubbish, that’s all I have to say. Come on, Mabel.”

He stalked out of the restaurant.

Mabel gave Henry a hug.

“You’ll make a great success of this,” she said. “I’m so proud of you, and you.” She reached out and squeezed Carol’s hand.

“You don’t have to leave,” said Carol, impulsively. “You can stay here, with us.”

She looked at Henry who nodded. “Yes,” he said. “There’s room in the bungalow.”

“I have to go,” said Mabel. “He’s all mouth, you know. I’ll be fine.”

She stroked Henry’s face and smiled sadly then left.

Jamie relaxed and pulled his chair back up to the table.

“Jesus,” said Allan. “I hope that’s not going to happen every time we eat here.”

He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

“What was that all about?” Denise asked Julie. “He said you’d been round?”

“Oh mum,” said Julie. “Don’t you see? Henry had to face up to that bastard, get the demon off his back.”

“Bit drastic, don’t you think?” said Denise, looking at Henry who was staring out through the window of the restaurant, his arm around Carol who was quietly crying.

“She’s right,” said Jamie, unexpectedly. “The final test. Had to do it on his own. Julie’s right. Had to happen sooner or later. Stand up under fire.”

“I’ve got to get back to work,” said Henry, at a loss about what to do. He kissed Carol then turned and walked back to the kitchen.

The couple in the corner quietly resumed their conversation.

* * *

At the end of the evening, when the last guest had left, Carol stood in the doorway watching Henry stacking his pots and pans in the dishwasher.

“So that was your dad, was it?” she said. “Funny, I thought you were scared of him. Didn’t seem that way to me.”

“No,” said Henry. “I was surprised to see him, yes. I wasn’t expecting it. But you’re right. I wasn’t scared of him anymore.”

He giggled then kissed her.

“You know, I’m glad he came tonight. I don’t think I’m scared of anything anymore. Let’s join the others, we can finish clearing up in the morning.”

“I propose a toast,” said Allan. “To Henry and Carol and every future success.”

“Hear, hear,” said Jamie and clinked glasses with Allan.

“Why did you go to see my parents?” Henry asked Julie.

She looked at him calmly. “He was the last hurdle you had to overcome and you had to face him as an equal. He can't hurt you anymore and don't you ever forget that.”

Henry took Julie's hand and squeezed it. “Thank you,” he said, “for everything.”

“Well, that was a funny old evening, wasn't it,” said Denise. “We're all so very proud of you, Henry.”

Henry smiled self consciously then Julie nudged Jamie who tapped a spoon against a wine glass to get everyone's attention.

“By the way,” said Julie, thinking that Henry had hogged the limelight long enough. “Jamie and I are getting married.”